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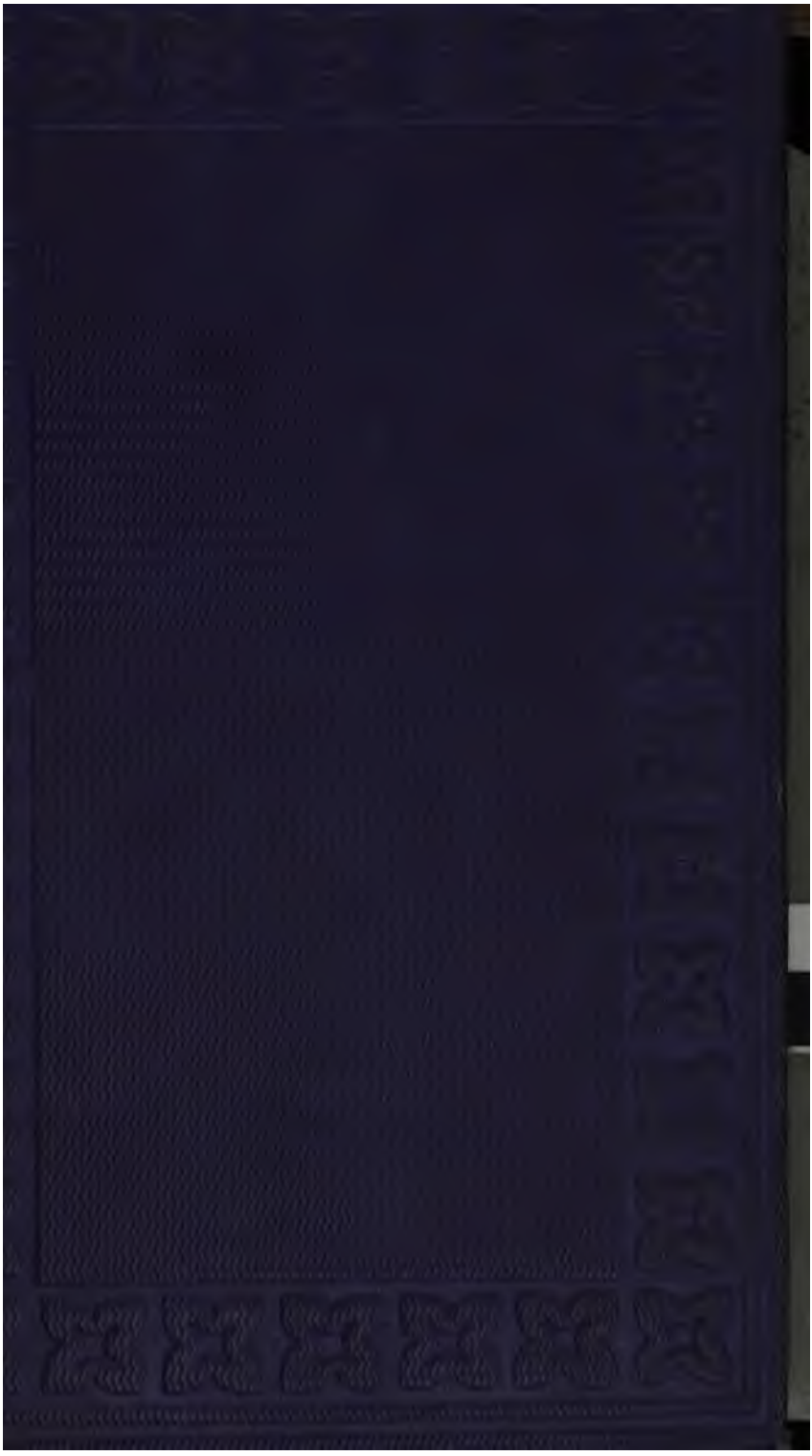

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MISTRESS AND MAID.

VOL. II.

LONDON

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MISTRESS AND MAID.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN,"

&c. &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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MISTRESS AND MAID.

CHAPTER I.

NEXT morning, while, with that cheerful, unanxious countenance which those about an invalid must learn continually to wear, Elizabeth was trying to persuade her mistress not to rise, she heard a knock, and made some excuse for escaping. She well knew what it was, and who had come.

There, in the parlour, sat Miss Hilary, Mrs. Jones talking at her rather than to her, for she hardly seemed to hear; but that she had already heard everything was clear enough. Her drawn white face, the tight clasp of her hands, showed that the ill tidings had struck her hard.

"Go away, Mrs. Jones," cried Elizabeth,

fiercely; "Miss Hilary will call when she wants you."

And with an ingenious movement that just fell short of a push, somehow the woman was got on the other side of the parlour-door, which Elizabeth immediately shut. Then Miss Hilary stretched her hands across the table, and looked up piteously in her servant's face.

Only a servant; only that poor servant to whom she could look for any comfort in this sore trouble, this bitter humiliation. There was no attempt at disguise or concealment between mistress and maid.

"Mrs. Jones has told me everything, Elizabeth. How is my sister? She does not know?"

"No; and I think she is a good deal better this morning. She has been very ill all this week; only she would not let me send for you. She is really getting well now; I'm sure of that."

"Thank God!" And then Miss Hilary began to weep.

Elizabeth also was thankful, even for

those tears, for she had been perplexed by the hard, dry-eyed look of misery—a misery deeper than anything she could comprehend, or than the circumstances seemed to warrant.

It was deeper. It was not only Ascott's arrest; many a lad has got into debt and got out again—the first taste of the law proving a warning to him for life; but in to-day's event Hilary seemed to foresee an ominous "beginning of the end." The fatal end—which seemed to overhang like an hereditary cloud, to taint as with hereditary disease, the Leaf family.

Another bitterness (and who shall blame it, for when love is really love, have not the lovers a right to be one another's first thought?)—what would Robert Lyon say? To his honest Scotch nature poverty was nothing; honour everything. She knew his horror of debt was even equal to her own. This, and her belief in his freedom from all false pride, had sustained her against many doubts lest he might think the less of her because of her present position—might feel ashamed could he see her sitting in her

daily place at that high desk, or even occasionally serving in the shop.

Many a time, things which she would have passed over lightly on her own account, she had felt on his; felt how they would annoy and vex him. The exquisitely natural thought which Tennyson has put into poetry—

> If I am dear to some one else,
> Then I should be to myself more dear—

had often come, prosaically enough perhaps, into her head, and prevented her from spoiling her little hands with unnecessarily rough work, or carelessly passing down ill streets and byways, where she knew Robert Lyon, had he been in London, would never have allowed her to go. Now what did such things signify? What need of taking care of herself? These were all superficial, external disgraces; the real disgrace was within. The plague-spot had burst out anew: it seemed as if this day were the recommencement of that bitter life of penury, misery, and humiliation familiar through three generations to the women of the Leaf family.

It appeared like a fate. No use to try and struggle out of it, stretching her arms up to Robert Lyon's tender, honest, steadfast heart, there to be sheltered, taken care of, and made happy. No happiness for her! Nothing but to go on enduring and enduring to the end.

Such was Hilary's first emotion: morbid perhaps, yet excusable. It might have lasted longer—though in her healthy nature it could not have lasted very long, had not the reaction come, suddenly and completely, by the opening of the parlour-door and the appearance of Miss Leaf.

Miss Leaf—pale, indeed; but neither alarmed nor agitated; who hearing somehow that her child had arrived, had hastily dressed herself, and come down stairs, in order not to frighten Hilary. And as she took her in her arms, and kissed her with those mother-like kisses, which were the sweetest Hilary had as yet ever known—the sharp anguish passed from the poor girl's heart.

"Oh, Johanna! I can bear anything as long as I have you."

And so in this simple and natural way, the miserable secret about Ascott came out.

Being once out, it did not seem half so dreadful; nor was its effect nearly so serious as Miss Hilary and Elizabeth had feared. Miss Leaf bore it wonderfully; she might almost have guessed it beforehand; they would have thought she had, but that she said decidedly she had not.

"Still you need not have minded telling me; though it was very good and thoughtful of you, Elizabeth. You have gone through a great deal for our sakes, my poor girl."

Elizabeth burst into one smothered sob —the first and the last.

"Nay," said Miss Leaf, very kindly—for this unwonted emotion in their servant moved them both— "You shall tell me the rest another time. Go down now, and get Miss Hilary some breakfast."

When Elizabeth had departed, the sisters turned to one another. They did not talk much; where was the use of it? They both knew the worst, both as to facts and fears.

"What must be done, Johanna?"

Johanna, after a long pause, said, "I see but one thing—to get him home."

Hilary started up, and walked to and fro along the room.

"No, not that. I will never agree to it. We cannot help him. He does not deserve helping. If his debts were for food or any other necessaries; but for mere luxuries, mere fine clothes; it is his tailor who has arrested him, you know. I would rather have gone in rags! I would rather see us all in rags! His conduct is mean, selfish, cowardly, and I despise him for it. Though he is my own flesh and blood, I despise him."

"Hilary!"

"No," and the tears burst from her angry eyes, "I don't mean that I despise him. I'm sorry for him; there is good in him, poor dear lad; but I despise his weakness; I feel fierce to think how much it will cost us all, and especially you, Johanna. Only think what comforts of all sorts that thirty pounds would have brought to you!"

"God will provide," said Johanna, earnestly. "But I know, my dear, this grief is sharper to you than to me. Besides, I have been more used to it."

She closed her eyes with a half shudder, as if living over again the old days—when Henry Leaf's wife and eldest daughter used to have to give dinner-parties upon food that stuck in their throats, as if every morsel had been stolen; which in truth it was, and yet they were helpless, innocent thieves; when they and the children had to wear unpaid-for clothes, that seemed to poison them like the shirt of Dejanira; when they durst not walk along special streets, nor pass particular shops, for the feeling that the shop-people must be staring and pointing and jibing at them, "Pay me what thou owest."

"But things cannot again be so bad as those days, Hilary. Ascott is young; he may mend. People *can* mend, my child; and he has had such a different bringing-up from what his father had, and his grandfather too. We must not be hopeless yet.

You see,"—and making Hilary kneel down before her, she took her by both hands, as if to impart something of her own quietness to this poor heart, struggling as young, honest, upright hearts do struggle with something which their whole nature revolts against, and loathes, and scorns—"You see, the boy is our boy; our own flesh and blood. We were very foolish to let him away from us for so long. We might have made him better if we had kept him at Stowbury. But he is young; that is my hope of him; and he was always fond of his aunts, and is still, I think."

Hilary smiled sadly. "Deeds, not words. I don't believe in words."

"Well, let us put aside believing, and only act. Let us give him another chance."

Hilary shook her head. "Another, and another, and another—it will be always the same. I know it will. I can't tell how it is, Johanna; but whenever I look at you, I feel so stern and hard to Ascott. It seems as if there were circumstances when pity to some was wicked injustice to

others; as if there were times when it is right and needful to lop off, at once and for ever, a rotten branch, rather than let the whole tree go to rack and ruin. And I would do it! I should think myself justified in doing it!"

"But not just yet. He is only a boy—our own boy."

And the two women, in both of whom the maternal passion existed strong and deep, yet in the one never had found, and in the other never might find, its natural channel, wept together over this lad, almost as mothers weep.

"But what can we do?" said Hilary at last. "Thirty pounds, and not a halfpenny to pay it with! Must we borrow?"

"Oh! no, no," was the answer, with a shrinking gesture; "no borrowing. There is the diamond ring."

This was a sort of heirloom from eldest daughter to eldest daughter of the Leaf family, which had been kept, even as a sort of superstition, through all temptations of poverty. The last time Miss Leaf

looked at it, she had remarked, jestingly, it should be given some day to that important personage, talked of for many a year among the three aunts—Mrs. Ascott Leaf.

"Who must do without it now," said Johanna, looking regretfully at the ring. "That is, if he ever takes to himself a wife, poor boy."

Hilary answered, beneath her breath, "Unless he alters, I earnestly hope he never may." And there came over her, involuntarily, a wild, despairing thought—Would it not be better that neither Ascott nor herself should ever be married, that the family might die out, and trouble the world no more?

Nevertheless, she rose up to do what she knew had to be done, and what there was nobody to do but herself.

"Don't mind it, Johanna; for, indeed, I do not. I shall go to a first-rate, respectable jeweller, and he will not cheat me; and then I shall find my way to the sponging-house—isn't that what they call it? I daresay many a poor woman has been

there before me. I am not the first, and shall not be the last, and nobody will harm me. I think I look honest, though my name is Leaf."

She laughed—a bitter laugh; but Johanna silenced it in a close embrace; and when Hilary rose up again, she was quite her natural self. She summoned Elizabeth, and began giving her all domestic directions, just as usual; finally, bade her sister good-bye in a tone as like her ordinary tone as possible, and left her settled on the sofa in content and peace.

Elizabeth followed to the door. Miss Hilary had asked her for the card on which Ascott had written the address of the place where he had been taken; and though the girl said not a word, her anxious eyes made piteous inquiry.

Her mistress patted her on the shoulder.

"Never mind about me; I shall come to no harm, Elizabeth."

"It's a bad place; such a dreadful place, Mrs. Jones says."

"Is it?" Elizabeth guessed part, but

not the whole of the feelings that made Hilary hesitate, shrink even, from the duty which lay before her. Only as a duty could she have done it at all. "No matter, I must go. Take care of my sister."

She ran down the door-steps, and walked quickly through the Crescent. It was a clear, sunshiny, frosty day; such a day as always both cheered and calmed her. She had, despite all her cares, youth, health, energy; and a holy and constant love lay like a sleeping angel in her heart. Must I tell the truth, and own that before she had gone two streets' length, Hilary ceased to feel so very, very miserable?

Love—this kind of love of which I speak —is a wonderful thing; the most wonderful thing in all the world. The strength it gives, the brightness, the actual happiness, even in hardest times, is often quite miraculous. When Hilary sat waiting in the jeweller's shop, she watched a little episode of high life—two wealthy people choosing their marriage-plate; the bride, so careless

and haughty; the bridegroom, so unutterably mean to look at, stamped with the innate smallness and coarseness of soul which his fine clothes only made more apparent. And she thought—oh, how fondly she thought!—of that honest, manly mien; of that true, untainted heart, which, she felt sure, had never loved any woman but herself; of the warm, firm hand, carving its way through the world for her sake, and waiting patiently till it could openly clasp hers, and give her everything it had won. She would not have exchanged him, Robert Lyon, with his penniless love, his half-hopeless fortunes, or maybe his lot of never-ending care, for the "brawest bridegroom" under the sun.

Under this sun—the common, every-day, winter sun of Regent and Oxford streets—she walked now as brightly and bravely as if there were no trouble before her, no painful meeting with Ascott, no horrid humiliation from which every womanly feeling in her nature shrunk with acute pain. "Robert, my Robert!" she

whispered in her heart, and felt him so near to her that she was at rest, she hardly knew why.

Possibly, grand, or clever, or happy people, who condescend to read this story, may despise it; think it un-ideal, uninteresting; treating of small things and common people; "poor persons," in short. I cannot help it. I write for the poor; not to excite the compassion of the rich towards them, but to show them their own dignity, and the bright side of their poverty. For it has its bright side; and its very darkest, when no sin is mixed up therewith, is brighter than many an outwardly prosperous life.

"*Better is a dinner of herbs, where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith.*"

"*Better is a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than a house full of sacrifices and strife.*"

With these two sage proverbs—which all acknowledge, but few really believe, or surely they would act a little more as if they did—I leave Johanna Leaf sitting

silently in her solitary parlour, knitting stockings for her child; weaving many a mingled web of thought withal, yet never letting a stitch go down; and Hilary Leaf walking cheerily and fearlessly, up one strange street and down another, to find out the "bad" place, where she once had no idea it would ever have been her lot to go. One thing she was sure of, that if Robert Lyon had known she was going, or known half the cares she had to meet, he would have recrossed the Indian seas—have risked fortune, competence, hope of the future, which was the only cheer of his hard present—in order to save her from them all.

The minute history of this painful day I do not mean to tell. Hilary never told it till, years after, she wept it out upon a bosom that could understand the whole, and would take good care that, while the life beat in his, she never should go through the like again.

Ascott came home—that is, was brought home—very humbled, contrite, and grateful.

There was no one to meet him but his aunt Johanna, and she just kissed him quietly, and bade him come over to the fire; he was shivering, and somewhat pale. He had even two tears in his handsome eyes, the first Ascott had been known to shed since he was a boy. That he felt a good deal, perhaps as much as was in his nature to feel, there could be no doubt. So his two aunts were glad and comforted; gave him his tea, and the warmest seat at the hearth; said not a harsh word to him, but talked to him about indifferent things. Tea being over, Hilary was anxious to get everything painful ended before Selina came home from her week's visit at Dulwich—Selina, who, they felt by instinct, had now a separate interest from themselves, and had better not be told this sad story if possible; so she asked her nephew "if he remembered what they had to do this evening?"

"Had to do? Oh, Aunt Hilary, I 'm so tired! can't you let me be quiet? Only this one night. I promise to bring you everything on Monday."

"Monday will be too late. I shall be away. And you know you can't do without my excellent arithmetic," she added, with a faint smile. "Now, Ascott, be a good boy—fetch down all those bills, and let us go over them together."

"His debts came to more than the thirty pounds, then?" said his aunt Johanna, when he was gone.

"Yes. But the ring sold for fifty." And Hilary drew to the table, got writing materials, and sat waiting, with a dull, silent patience in her look; at which Johanna sighed and questioned her no more.

The aunt and nephew spent some time in going over that handful of papers, and approximating to the sum total, in that kind of awful arithmetic when figures cease to be mere figures, but grow into avenging monsters, bearing with them life or death.

"Is that all? You are quite sure it is all?" said Hilary at last, pointing to the whole amount, and looking steadily into Ascott's eyes.

He flushed up, and asked what she meant by doubting his word.

"Not that, but you might easily have made a mistake; you are so careless about money matters."

"Ah, that's it. I'm just careless, and so I come to grief. But I never mean to be careless any more. I'll be as precise as you. I'll balance my books every week—every day if you like—exactly as you do at that horrid shop, Aunt Hilary."

So he was rattling on, but Hilary stopped him by pointing to the figures.

"You see, this sum is more than we expected. How is it to be met? Think for yourself. You are a man now."

"I know that," said Ascott, sullenly; "but what's the use of it?—money makes the man, and I have none. If the ancient Peter would but die now, and leave me his heir! though to be sure Aunt Selina might be putting her oar in. Perhaps—considering I'm Aunt Selina's nephew—if I were to walk into the old chap now he

might be induced to fork out! Hurrah! that's a splendid idea."

"What idea?"

"I'll borrow the money from old Ascott."

"That means, because he has already given, you would have him keep on giving —and you would take and take and take —Ascott, I'm ashamed of you."

But Ascott only burst out laughing. "Nonsense!—he has money and I have none; why shouldn't he give it me?"

"Why?"—she repeated, her eyes flashing and her little feminine figure seeming to grow taller while she spoke,—"I'll tell you, since you don't seem yourself to understand it. Because a young man, with health and strength in him, should blush to eat any bread but what he himself earns. Because he should work at anything and everything, stint himself of every luxury and pleasure, rather than ask or borrow, or, except under rare circumstances, rather than be indebted to any living soul for a single halfpenny. I would not, if I were a young man."

"What a nice young man you would make, Aunt Hilary!"

There was something in the lad's imperturbable good humour at once irritating and disarming. Whatever his faults, they were more negative than positive; there was no malice prepense about him—no absolute personal wickedness. And he had the strange charm of manner and speech which keeps up one's outer surface of habitual affection towards a person, long after all its foundations of trust and respect have hopelessly crumbled away.

"Come now—my pretty aunt must go with me. She will manage the old ogre much better than I. And he must be managed somehow. It 's all very fine talking of independence, but isn't it hard that a poor fellow should be living in constant dread of being carried off to that horrid, uncleanly, beastly den—bah! I don't like thinking of it—and all for want of twenty pounds? You must go to him, Aunt Hilary."

She saw they must; there was no help

for it. Even Johanna said so. It was, after all, only asking for Ascott's quarterly allowance three days in advance, for it was due on Tuesday. But what jarred against her proud, honest spirit was the implication that such a request gave of taking as a right that which had been so long bestowed as a favour. Nothing but the great strait they were in could ever have driven her to consent that Mr. Ascott should be applied to at all; but since it must be done, she felt that she had better do it herself. Was it from some lurking doubt or dread that Ascott might not speak the entire truth, as she had insisted upon its being spoken, before Mr. Ascott was asked for anything? since whatever he gave, must be given with a full knowledge on his part of the whole pitiable state of affairs.

It was with a strange, sad feeling—the sadder because he never seemed to suspect it, but talked and laughed with her as usual—that she took her nephew's arm, and walked silently through the dark squares, perfectly well aware that he only asked her to go

with him in order to do an unpleasant thing which he did not like to do himself, and that she only went with him in the character of watch, or supervisor, to try and save him from doing something which she herself would be ashamed should be done.

Yet he was ostensibly the head, hope, and stay of the family. Alas! many a family has to submit to, and smile under, an equally melancholy and fatal sham.

CHAPTER II.

Mr. Ascott was sitting, half asleep, in his solitary dining-room, his face rosy with wine, his heart warmed also, probably from the same cause. Not that he was in the least "tipsy," that low word applicable only to low people, and not to men of property, who have a right to enjoy all the good things of this life. He was scarcely even "merry,"—merely "comfortable,"—in that cosy, benevolent state which middle-aged or elderly gentlemen are apt to fall into after a good dinner and good wine, when they have no mental resources, and the said good dinner and good wine constitute their best notion of felicity.

Yet wealth and comfort are not things to be despised. Hilary herself was not insensible to the pleasantness of this warm,

well-lit, crimson-atmosphered apartment. She as well as her neighbours liked pretty things about her, soft, harmonious colours to look at and wear, well-cooked food to eat, cheerful rooms to live in. If she could have had all these luxuries with those she loved to share them, no doubt she would have been much happier. But yet she felt to the full that solemn truth, that "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things that he possesses;" and though hers was outwardly so dark, so full of poverty, anxiety, and pain, still she knew that inwardly it owned many things, one thing especially, which no money could buy, and without which, fine houses, fine furniture, and fine clothes—indeed, all the comforts and splendours of existence—would be worse than valueless, actual torment. So, as she looked around her, she felt not the slightest envy of her sister Selina.

Nor of honest Peter, who rose up from his arm-chair, pulling the yellow silk handkerchief from his sleepy face, and,

it must be confessed, receiving his future connections very civilly, and even kindly.

Now, how was he to be told? How, when she and Ascott sat over the wine and dessert he had ordered for them, listening to the rich man's complaisant pomposities, were they to explain that they had come a-begging, asking him, as the climax to his liberalities, to advance a few pounds, in order to keep the young man whom he had for years generously and sufficiently maintained, out of prison? This, smooth it over as one might, was, Hilary felt, the plain English of the matter, and as minute after minute lengthened, and nothing was said of their errand, she sat upon thorns.

But Ascott drank his wine and ate his walnuts quite composedly.

At last Hilary said, in a sort of desperation, "Mr. Ascott, I want to speak to you."

"With pleasure, my dear young lady. Will you come to my study? I have a most elegantly furnished study, I assure you. And any affair of yours"—

"Thank you, but it is not mine; it concerns my nephew here."

And then she braced up all her courage, and while Ascott busied himself over his walnuts—he had the grace to look excessively uncomfortable—she told, as briefly as possible, the bitter truth.

Mr. Ascott listened, apparently without surprise, and anyhow without comment. His self-important loquacity ceased, and his condescending smile passed into a sharp, reticent, business look. He knitted his shaggy brows, contracted that coarsely-hung but resolute mouth, in which lay the secret of his success in life, buttoned up his coat, and stuck his hands behind him over his coat-tails. As he stood there on his own hearth, with all his comfortable splendours about him—a man who had made his own money, hardly and honestly, who from the days when he was a poor errand-lad had had no one to trust to but himself, yet had managed always to help himself, ay, and others too—Hilary's stern sense of justice contrasted him with the graceful

young man who sat opposite to him, so much his inferior, and so much his debtor. She owned that Peter Ascott had a right to look both contemptuous and displeased.

"A very pretty story, but I almost expected it," said he.

And there he stopped. In his business capacity he was too acute a man to be a man of many words, and his feelings, if they existed, were kept to himself.

"It all comes to this, young man," he continued, after an uncomfortable pause, in which Hilary could have counted every beat of her heart, and even Ascott played with his wine-glass in a nervous kind of way—"you want money, and you think I' m sure to give it, because it wouldn't be pleasant just now to have discreditable stories going about concerning the future Mrs. Ascott's relatives. You're quite right, it wouldn't. But I 'm too old a bird to be caught with chaff for all that. You must rise very early in the morning to take *me* in."

Hilary started up in an agony of shame.

"That's not fair, Mr. Ascott. We do not take you in. Have we not told you the whole truth? I was determined you should know it before we asked you for one farthing of your money. If there were the smallest shadow of a chance for Ascott in any other way, we never would have come to you at all. It is a horrible, horrible humiliation!"

It might be that Peter Ascott had a soft place in his heart, or that this time, just before his marriage, was the one crisis which sometimes occurs in a hard man's life, when, if the right touch comes, he becomes malleable ever after; but he looked kindly at the poor girl, and said in quite a gentle way—

"Don't vex yourself, my dear. I shall give the young fellow what he wants; nobody ever called Peter Ascott stingy. But he has cost me enough already; he must shift for himself now. Hand me over that cheque-book, Ascott; but remember this is the last you 'll ever see of my money."

He wrote the memorandum of the cheque

inside the page, then tore off the cheque itself, and proceeded to write the words "Twenty pounds," date it, and sign it, lingering over the signature, as if he had a certain pride in the honest name "Peter Ascott," and was well aware of its monetary value on 'Change and elsewhere.

"There, Miss Hilary, I flatter myself that's not a bad signature, nor would be easily forged. One cannot be too careful over—What's that? a letter, John!"

By his extreme eagerness, almost snatching it from his footman's hands, it was one of importance. He made some sort of rough apology, drew the writing materials to him, wrote one or two business-looking letters, and made out one or two more cheques.

"Here's yours, Ascott; take it, and let me have done with it," said he, throwing it across the table, folded up. "Can't waste time on such small transactions. Ma'am, excuse me, but five thousand pounds depends on my getting these letters written and sent off within a quarter of an hour."

Hilary bent her head, and sat watching the pen scratch, and the clock tick on the mantel-piece; thinking, if this really was to be the last of his godfather's allowance, what on earth would become of Ascott? For Ascott himself, he said not a word. Not even when, the letters despatched, Mr. Ascott rose, and administering a short, sharp homily, tacitly dismissed his visitors. Whether this silence was sullenness, cowardice, or shame, Hilary could not guess.

She quitted the house with a sense of grinding humiliation almost intolerable. But still the worst was over; the money had been begged and given; there was no fear of a prison. And spite of everything, Hilary felt a certain relief that this was the last time Ascott would be indebted to his godfather. Perhaps the total cessation of extraneous help might force the young man upon his own resources, compel his easy temperament into active energy, and bring out in him those dormant qualities that his aunts still fondly hoped existed in him.

"Don't be down-hearted, Ascott," she

said; "we will manage to get on somehow, till you hear of a practice, and then you must work—work like a 'brick,' as you call it. You will, I know."

He answered nothing.

"I won't let you give in, my boy," she went on, kindly. "Who would ever dream of giving in, at your age, with health and strength, a good education, and no incumbrances whatever—not even aunts! for we will not stand in your way, be sure of that. If you cannot settle here, you shall try to get out abroad, as you have sometimes wished, as an army surgeon or a ship's doctor; you say these appointments are easy enough to be had. Why not try? Believe me, we will consent to anything, if only we can see your life busy and useful and happy."

Thus she talked, feeling far more tenderly to him in his forlorn despondency, than when they had quitted the house two hours before. But Ascott took not the slightest notice. A strange fit of sullenness or depression seemed to have come over

him, which, when they reached home, and met Aunt Johanna's silently questioning face, changed into devil-may-care indifference.

"Oh yes, aunt, we've done it; we've got the money, and now I may go to the dogs as soon as I like."

"No," said Aunt Hilary, "it is nothing of the sort; it is only that Ascott must for the future depend upon himself, and not upon his godfather. Take courage," she added, and went up to him and kissed him on the forehead; "we'll never let our boy go to the dogs! and, as for this disappointment, or any disappointment, why, it's just like a cold bath—it takes away your breath for the time, and then you rise up out of it, brisker and fresher than ever."

But Ascott shook his head with a fierce denial. "Why should that old fellow be as rich as Crœsus, and I as poor as a rat? Why should I be put into the world to enjoy myself, and can't? Why was I made like what I am, and then punished for it? Whose fault is it?"

Ay, *whose*? The eternal, unsolvable problem rose up before Hilary's imagination. The ghastly spectre of that everlasting doubt, which haunts even the firmest faith sometimes—and which all the nonsense written about that mystery which,

> Binding nature fast in fate,
> Leaves free the human will,

only makes darker than before—oppressed her for the time with an inexpressible dread.

Ay, *why* was it that the boy was what he was? From his inherited nature, his temperament, or his circumstances? What, or, more awful question still, *who* was to blame?

But as Hilary's thoughts went deeper down, the question answered itself—at least as far as it ever can be answered in this narrow, finite stage of being. Whose will—we dare not say Whose blame—is it that evil must inevitably generate evil? that the smallest wrong-doing in any human being rouses a chain of results which may

fatally involve other human beings in an almost incalculable circle of misery? The wages of sin is death. Were it not so, sin would cease to be sin, and holiness, holiness. If He, the All-holy, who for some inscrutable purpose saw fit to allow the existence of evil, allowed any other law than this, in either the spiritual or material world, would He not be denying Himself, counteracting the necessities of His own righteous nature, to which evil is so antagonistic, that we cannot doubt it must in the end be cast into total annihilation—into the allegorical lake of fire and brimstone which is the "second death?" Nay, do they not in reality deny Him and His holiness almost as much as Atheists do, who preach that the one great salvation which He has sent into the world is a salvation *from punishment*—a keeping out of hell and getting into heaven—instead of a salvation *from sin*, from the power and love of sin, through the love of God in Christ?

I give these thoughts, because like lightning they passed through Hilary's mind, as

sometimes a whole chain of thoughts do, link after link; and because they helped her to answer her nephew quietly and briefly; for she saw he was in no state of mind to be argued with.

"I cannot explain, Ascott, why it is that any of us are what we are, and why things happen to us as they do; it is a question we none of us understand, and in this world never shall. But if we know what we ought to be, and how we may make the best of everything, good or bad, that happens to us, surely that is enough, without perplexing ourselves about anything more."

Ascott smiled, half contemptuously, half carelessly; he was not a young fellow likely to perplex himself long or deeply about these sort of things.

"Anyhow, I've got £20 in my pocket, so I can't starve for a day or two. Let's see; where is it to be cashed? Hillo! who would have thought the old fellow would have been so stupid! Look there, Aunt Hilary!"

She was so unfamiliar with cheques for

£20, poor little woman, that she did not at first recognise the omission of the figures "£20" at the left hand corner. Otherwise, the cheque was correct.

"Ho, ho!" laughed Ascott, exceedingly amused, so easily was the current of his mind changed. "It must have been the £5,000 pending that muddled the 'cute old fellow's brains. I wonder whether he will remember it afterwards, and come posting up to see that I 've taken no ill advantage of his blunder; changed this 'Twenty' into 'Seventy,' for instance. I easily could, and put the figures £70 here. What a good joke!"

"Had you not better go to him at once, and have the matter put right?"

"Rubbish! I can put it right myself. It makes no difference who fills up a cheque, so that it is signed all correct. A deal you women know of business!"

But still Hilary, with a certain womanish uneasiness about money matters, and an anxiety to have the thing settled beyond doubt, urged him to go.

"Very well; just as you like. I do believe you are afraid of my turning forger."

He buttoned his coat with a half-sulky, half-defiant air, left his supper untasted, and disappeared.

It was midnight before he returned. His aunts were still sitting up, imagining all sorts of horrors, in an anxiety too great for words; but when Hilary ran to the door, with the natural "Oh, Ascott, where have you been?" he pushed her aside with a gesture that was almost fierce in its repulsion.

"Where have I been? Taking a walk round the Park; that's all. Can't I come and go as I like, without being pestered by women? I'm horribly tired. Let me alone, do!"

They did let him alone. Deeply wounded, Aunt Johanna took no further notice of him than to set his chair a little closer to the fire, and Aunt Hilary slipped down stairs for more coals. There she found Elizabeth, who they thought had long since

gone to bed, sitting on the stairs, very sleepy, but watching still.

"Is he come in?" she asked; "because there are more bailiffs after him. I'm sure of it; I saw them."

This, then, might account for his keeping out of the way till after twelve o'clock, and also for his wild, haggard look. Hilary put aside her vague dread of some new misfortune; assured Elizabeth that all was right: he had got wherewithal to pay everybody on Monday morning, and would be safe till then. All debtors were safe on Sunday.

"Go to bed now—there's a good girl; it is hard that you should be troubled with our troubles."

Elizabeth looked up with those fond grey eyes of hers. She was but a servant, and yet looks like these engraved themselves ineffaceably on her mistress's heart, imparting the comfort that all pure love gives, from any one human being to another.

And love has its wonderful rights and

rewards. Perhaps Elizabeth, who thought herself nothing at all to her mistress, would have marvelled to know how much closer her mistress felt to this poor, honest, loving girl, whose truth she believed in, and on whose faithfulness she implicitly depended, than towards her own nephew, who sat there moodily over the hearth; deeply pitied, sedulously cared for, but as for being confided in, relied on, in great matters or small, his own concerns or theirs—the thing was impossible.

They could not even ask him—they dared not, in such a strange mood was he—the simple question, had he seen Mr. Ascott, and had Mr. Ascott been annoyed about the cheque? It would not have been referred to at all, had not Hilary, in holding his coat to dry, taken his pocket-book out of the breast pocket, when he snatched at it angrily.

"What are you meddling with my things for? Do you want to get at the cheque, and be peering at it to see if it's all right? But you can't; I've paid it away. Perhaps

you'd like to know who to? Then you shan't. I'll not be accountable to you for all my proceedings. I'll not be treated like a baby. You'd better mind what you are about, Aunt Hilary."

Never, in all his childish naughtiness or boyish impertinence, had Ascott spoken to her in such a tone. She regarded him at first with simple astonishment, then hot indignation, which spurred her on to stand up for her dignity, and not submit to be insulted by her own nephew. But then came back upon her her own doctrine, taught by her own experience, that character and conduct alone constitute real dignity or authority. She had, in point of fact, no authority over him; no one can have, not even parents, over a young man of his age, except that personal influence which is the strongest sway of all.

She said only, with a quietness that surprised herself—"You mistake, Ascott; I have no wish to interfere with you; you are your own master, and must take your own course. I only expect from

you the ordinary respect that a gentleman shows to a lady. You must be very tired and ill, or you would not have forgotten that."

"I didn't; or, if I did, I beg your pardon," said he, half subdued. "When are you going to bed?"

"Directly. Shall I light your candle also?"

"Oh, no; not for the world; I couldn't sleep a wink. I'd go mad if I went to bed. I think I'll turn out again, and have a cigar."

His whole manner was so strange that his aunt Johanna, who had sat aloof, terribly grieved, but afraid to interfere, was moved to rise up and go over to him.

"Ascott, my dear, you are looking quite ill. Be advised by your old auntie. Go to bed at once, and forget everything till morning."

"I wish I could; I only wish I could! Oh, Auntie, Auntie!"

He caught hold of her hand, which she had laid upon his head, looked up a minute

into her kind, fond face, and burst into a flood of boyish tears.

Evidently his troubles had been too much for him; he was in a state of great excitement. For some minutes his sobs were almost hysterical: then by a struggle he recovered himself, seemed exceedingly annoyed and ashamed, took up his candle, bade them a hurried good-night, and went to bed.

That is, he went to his room; but they heard him moving about overhead for a long while after; nor were they surprised that he refused to rise next morning, but lay most of the time with his door locked, until late in the afternoon, when he went out for a long walk, and did not return till supper, which he ate almost in silence. Then, after going up to his room, and coming down again, complaining bitterly how very cold it was, he crept in to the fireside with a book in his hand, of which, Hilary noticed, he scarcely read a line.

His aunts said nothing to him; they had determined not; they felt that further

interference would be not only useless, but dangerous.

"He will come to himself by and by; his moods, good or bad, never last long, you know," said Hilary, somewhat bitterly. "But, in the meantime, I think we had better just do as he says—let him alone."

And in that sad, hopeless state they passed the last hours of that dreary Sunday—afraid either to comfort him or reason with him; afraid, above all, to blame him, lest it might drive him altogether astray. That he was in a state of great misery, half sullen, half defiant, they saw, and were scarcely surprised at it; it was very hard not to be able to open their loving hearts to him, as those of one family should always do, making every trouble a common care, and every joy a universal blessing. But in his present state of mind—the sudden obstinacy of a weak nature conscious of its weakness, and dreading control—it seemed impossible either to break upon his silence or to force his confidence.

They might have been right in this, or

wrong; afterwards Hilary thought the latter. Many a time she wished, with a bitter regret, that instead of the quiet "Good night, Ascott," and the one rather cold kiss on his forehead, she had flung her arms round his neck, and insisted on his telling out his whole trouble to her, his nearest kinswoman, who had been aunt and sister both to him all his life. But it was not done: she parted from him, as she did Sunday after Sunday, with a sore, sick feeling of how much he might be to her, to them all, and how little he really was.

If this silence of hers was a mistake—one of those mistakes which sensitive people sometimes make—it was, like all similar errors, only too sorrowfully remembered and atoned for.

CHAPTER III.

THE week passed by, and Hilary received no ill tidings from home. Incessant occupation kept her from dwelling too much on anxious subjects: besides, she would not have thought it exactly right, while her time and her mental powers were, for so many hours per diem, legally Miss Balquidder's, to waste the one, and weaken the other, by what is commonly called "fretting." Nor, carrying this conscientious duty to a higher degree, and towards a higher Master, would she have dared to sit grieving overmuch over their dark future. And yet it was very dark. She pondered over what was to be done with Ascott, or whether he was still to be left to the hopeless hope of doing something for himself: how long the little establishment at No. 15 could be kept

together, or whether, after Selina's marriage, it would not be advisable to make some change that should contract expenses, and prevent this hard separation, from Monday to Saturday, between Johanna and herself.

These, with equally anxious thoughts, attacked her in crowds, every day and every hour; but she had generally sufficient will to put them aside: at least till after work was done, when they could neither stupefy nor paralyse her. Trouble had to her been long enough familiar to have taught her its own best lesson—that the mind can, in degree, rule itself, even as it rules the body.

Thus, in her business duties, which were principally keeping accounts, in her management of the two young people under her, and of the small domestic establishment connected with the shop, Hilary went steadily on, day after day; made no blunders in her arithmetic, no mistakes in her housekeeping. Being new to all her responsibilities, she had to give her whole mind to them; and she did it; and it was a blessing

to her—the sanctified blessing which rests upon labour, almost seeming to neutralise its primeval curse.

But night after night, when work was over, she sat alone at her sewing—the only time she had for it—and her thoughts went faster than her needle. She turned over plan after plan, and went back upon hope after hope, that had risen and broken like waves of the sea—nothing happening that she had expected: the only things which had happened, or which seemed to have any permanence or reality, being two things which she had never expected at all—Selina's marriage, and her own engagement with Miss Balquidder. It often is so, in most people's lives; until at last we learn to live on from day to day, doing each day's duty within the day, and believing that it is a righteous as well as a tender Hand which keeps the next day's page safely folded down.

So Hilary sat, glad to have a quiet hour in which not to grieve, but to lay out the details of a plan which had been maturing in her

mind all week, and which she meant definitely to propose to Johanna when she went home next day. It would cost her something to do this, and she had had some hesitations as to the propriety of the scheme itself, until at last she threw them all to the winds, as an honest-hearted, faithful, and faithfully-trusting woman would. Her plan was, that they should write to the only real friend the family had—the only man whose goodness she knew and she believed in—stating plainly their troubles and difficulties about their nephew; asking his advice, and possibly his help. He might know of something—some opening for a young surgeon in India, or some temporary appointment for the voyage out and home, which might catch Ascott's erratic and easily-attracted fancy; give him occupation for the time being, and at least detach him from his present life, with all its temptations and dangers.

Also, it might result in bringing the boy again under that influence which had been so beneficial to him while it lasted, and

which Hilary devoutly believed was the best influence in the world. Was it unnatural, if, mingled with an earnest desire for Ascott's good, was an underlying delight that that good should be done to him by Robert Lyon?

So when her plan was made, even to the very words in which she meant to unfold it to Johanna, and the very form in which Johanna should write the letter, she allowed herself a few brief minutes to think of him —Robert Lyon—to call up his eyes, his voice, his smile; to count, for the hundredth time, how many months—one less than twenty-four, so she could not say years now—it would be before he returned to England. Also, to speculate when and where they would first meet, and how he would speak the one word—all that was needful to change "liking" into "love," and "friend" into "wife." They had so grown together during many years, not the less so during these years of absence, when his constant letters had drawn him nearer if possible, as, with very reserved

people, a distant correspondence sometimes does—that it seemed as if such a change would hardly make any difference. And yet —and yet—As she sat and sewed, wearied with her day's labours, sad and perplexed, she thought—if only, by some strange magic, Robert Lyon were standing opposite; holding open his arms, ready and glad to take her and all her cares to his heart! How she would cling there! how closely she would creep to him, weeping with joy and content, neither afraid nor ashamed to let him see how dearly she loved him!

Only a dream, ah, only a dream! and she started from it at the sharp sound of the door-bell—started, blushing and trembling, as if it had been Robert Lyon himself, when she knew it would be only her two young assistants whom she had allowed to go out to tea in the neighbourhood. So she settled herself to her work again; put all her own thoughts by in their little private corners, and waited for the entrance and the harmless gossip of these two orphan girls, who were already beginning to love her, and

make a friend of her, and towards whom she felt herself quite an elderly and responsible person. Poor little Hilary! It seemed to be her lot always to take care of somebody or other. Would it ever be that anybody should take care of her?

So she cleared away some of her needlework, stirred the fire, which was dropping hollow and dull, and looked up pleasantly to the opening door. But it was not the girls: it was a man's foot and a man's voice.

"Any person of the name of Leaf living here? I wish to see her; on business."

At another time she would have laughed at the manner and words, which implied the impossibility that so great a gentleman as Mr. Ascott could want to see so small a person as the "person of the name of Leaf," except on business. But now she was startled by his appearance—it seemed to forebode evil. She sprang up, only able to articulate, "My sister"—

"Don't be frightened; your sisters are quite well. I called at No. 15 an hour ago."

"You saw them?"

"No; I thought it unadvisable, under the circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"I will explain, if you will allow me to sit down; bah! I've brought in sticking to me a straw out of that confounded shaky old cab; one ought never to be so stupid as to go anywhere except in one's own carriage. This is rather a small room, Miss Hilary."

He eyed it curiously round: and, lastly, with his most acute look, he eyed herself, as if he wished to find out something from her words or manner, before he went into further explanations.

But she stood before him, a little uneasy, and yet not very much so. The worst she expected was some quarrel with her sister Selina; perhaps the breaking off of the match, which would not have broken Hilary's heart at all events.

"So you have really no idea what I'm come about?"

"Not the slightest."

"Well!" said Peter Ascott, "I hardly thought it; but when one has been taken

in, as I have been, and this isn't the first time, by your family"—

"Mr. Ascott! will you explain yourself?"

"I will, ma'am. It is a very unpleasant business I come about; any other gentleman but me would have come with a police-officer at his back. Look here, Miss Hilary Leaf—Did you ever set eyes on this before?"

He took out his cheque-book, turned deliberately over the small memorandum halves of the page, till he came to one in particular, then hunted in his pocket-book.

"My banker sent in to-day my cancelled cheques, which I don't usually go over oftener than three months; he knew that, the scamp!"

Hilary looked up.

"Your nephew, to be sure. See!"

He spread before her a cheque, the very one she had watched him write, seven days before, made payable to "Ascott Leaf, or bearer," and signed, with the bold, peculiar signature, "Peter Ascott." Only instead of being a cheque for twenty pounds, it was for seventy.

Instantly the whole truth flashed upon Hilary: Ascott's remark about how easily the T could be made into an S; and what a "good joke" it would be; his long absence that night; his strange manner; his refusal to let her see the cheque again; all was clear as daylight.

Unfortunate boy! the temptation had been too strong for him. Under what sudden, insane impulse he had acted; under what delusion of being able to repay in time; or of Mr. Ascott's not detecting the fraud; or if discovered, of its being discovered after the marriage, when to prosecute his wife's nephew would be a disgrace to himself, could never be known. But there, unmistakable, was the altered cheque: which had been presented and paid, the banker, of course, not having the slightest suspicion of anything amiss.

"Well, isn't this a nice return for all my kindness? So cleverly done, too. But for the merest chance, I might not have found it out for three months. Oh, he's a precious young rascal, this nephew of

yours. His father was only a fool, but he — Do you know that this is a matter of forgery — forgery, Ma'am," added Mr. Ascott, waxing hot in his indignation.

Hilary uttered a bitter groan.

Yes, it was quite true. Their Ascott, their own boy, was no longer merely idle, extravagant, thoughtless; faults bad enough, but capable of being mended as he grew older: he had done that which to the end of his days he could never blot out. He was a swindler and a forger.

She clasped her hands tightly together, like one struggling with sharp physical pain, and tried to read the expression of Mr. Ascott's face. At last she put her question into words.

"What do you mean to do? Shall you prosecute him?"

Mr. Ascott crossed his legs, and settled his neck-cloth with a self-satisfied air. He evidently rather enjoyed the importance of his position. To be dictator, almost of life and death, to this unfortunate family, was a pride and pleasure worth, certainly, fifty pounds.

"Well, I haven't exactly determined. The money, you see, is of no moment to me, and I couldn't get it back anyhow. He 'll never be worth a halfpenny — that rascal. I might prosecute, and nobody would blame me; indeed, if I were to decline marrying your sister, and cut the whole set of you, I don't see," and he drew himself up, "that anything could be said against me. But—"

Perhaps, hard man as he was, he was touched by the agony of suspense in Hilary's face, for he added—

"Come, come, I won't disgrace your family; I won't do anything to harm the fellow."

"Thank you!" said Hilary, in a mechanical, unnatural voice.

"As for my money, he 's welcome to it, and much good may it do him! 'Set a beggar on horseback, and he 'll ride to the devil,' and in double quick time too. I 'll never hinder him. I wash my hands of the young scapegrace. But he 'd better not come near me again."

"No," acquiesced Hilary, absently.

"In fact," said Mr. Ascott, with a twinkle of his sharp eye, "I have already taken measures to frighten him away, so that he may make himself scarce, and give neither you nor me any farther trouble. I drove up to your door with a policeman, asked to see Mr. Leaf, and when I heard that he was out—a lie, of course—I left word I 'd be back in half an hour. Depend upon it," and he winked confidentially—"Ascott will smell a rat, and make a moonlight flitting of it, and we shall never hear of him any more."

"Never hear of Ascott any more?" repeated Hilary, and for an instant she ceased to think of him as what he was — swindler, forger, ungrateful to his benefactor, a disgrace to his name and family. She saw only the boy Ascott, with his bright looks and pleasant ways, whom his aunts had brought up from his cradle, and had loved so dearly in spite of all his faults—perhaps loved still. "Oh! I must go home. This will break Johanna's heart."

Mr. Peter Ascott possibly never had a heart, or it had been so stunted in its growth that it had never reached its fair development. Yet he felt sorry in his way for the "young person," who looked so deadly white, yet tried so hard not to make a scene; nay, when her two assistants came into the little parlour, deported herself with steady composure; told them that she was obliged suddenly to go home, but would be back, if possible, the next morning; then, in that orderly, accurate way which Peter Ascott could both understand and appreciate, proceeded to arrange with them about the shop and the house, in case she might be detained till Monday.

"You're not a bad woman of business," said he, with a patronising air. "This seems a tidy little shop; I daresay you'll get on in it."

She looked at him with a bewildered air, and went on speaking to the young woman at the door.

He peered about in his acute fashion.

"How much might your weekly receipts be in a place like this? And what salary

does Miss—Miss What 's-her-name, give to each of you ? You 're the head shop-woman, I suppose?"

Hilary made no answer; she scarcely heard. Her mind was full of but one thought. "Never see Ascott any more!" There came back upon her all the dreadful stories she had ever heard of lads who had committed forgery, or some similar offence, and in dread of punishment, had run away in despair, and never been heard of for years; had come to every kind of misery; perhaps even destroyed themselves. The impression was so horribly vivid, that when, pausing an instant in putting her books in their places, she heard the door-bell ring, Hilary with difficulty repressed a scream.

But it was no messenger of dreadful tidings; it was only Elizabeth Hand: and the quiet manner in which she entered showed Hilary at once that nothing dreadful had happened at home.

"Oh, no; nothing has happened," confirmed the girl. "Only Miss Leaf sent me to see if you could come home to-night in-

stead of to-morrow. She is quite well, that is, pretty well; but Mr. Leaf—"

Here catching sight of Miss Hilary's visitor, Elizabeth stopped short. Peter Ascott was one of her inveterate dislikes. She determined in his presence to let out no more of the family affairs.

On his part, Mr. Ascott had always treated Elizabeth as people like him usually do treat servants, afraid to lose an inch of his dignity, lest it should be an acknowledgment of equal birth and breeding with the class from which he was so terribly ashamed to have sprung. He regarded her now with a lordly air.

"Young woman—I believe you are the young woman who this afternoon told me that Mr. Leaf was out. It was a fib, of course."

Elizabeth turned round indignantly. "No, sir; I don't tell fibs. He was out."

"Did you give him my message when he came in?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what did he say, hey?"

"Nothing."

This was the literal fact; but there was something behind which Elizabeth had not the slightest intention of communicating. In fact, she set herself, physically and mentally, in an attitude of dogged resistance to any pumping of Mr. Ascott's. For though, as she had truly said, nothing special had happened, she felt sure that he was at the bottom of something which had gone wrong in the household that afternoon.

It was this. When Ascott returned, and she told him of his godfather's visit, the young man had suddenly turned so ghastly pale, that she had to fetch him a glass of water; and his aunt Johanna—Miss Selina was out—had to tend him and soothe him for several minutes before he was right again. When at last he seemed returning to his natural self, he looked wildly up at his aunt, and clung to her with such an outburst of feeling, that Elizabeth had thought it best to slip out of the room. It was tea-time, but still she waited outside for a half-hour or longer, when she gently knocked,

and, after a minute or two, Miss Leaf came out. She was so quiet that there seemed nothing amiss; at least not much—not more than Elizabeth had noticed many a time after talks between Ascott and his aunts.

"I'll take in the tea myself," she said; for I want you to start at once for Kensington to fetch Miss Hilary home. Don't frighten her—mind that, Elizabeth. Say I am much as usual myself; but that Mr. Leaf is not quite well, and I think she might do him good. Remember the exact words."

Elizabeth did remember, and would have delivered them accurately, if Mr. Ascott had not been present, and addressed her in that authoritative manner. Now, she resolutely held her tongue.

Peter Ascott might in his time have been accustomed to cringing, frightened, or impertinent servants, but this was a phase of the species with which he was totally unfamiliar. The girl was neither sullen nor rude, yet evidently quite independent; afraid neither of her mistress nor of himself.

He was sharp enough to see that whatever he wanted to get out of Elizabeth must be got in another way.

"Come, my wench, you'd better tell; it'll be none the worse for you, and it shan't harm the young fellow, though I daresay he has paid you well for holding your tongue."

"About what, sir?"

"Oh! you know what happened when you told him I had called, eh? Servants get to know all about their masters' affairs."

"Mr. Leaf isn't my master, and his affairs are nothing to me; I don't pry into 'em," replied Elizabeth. "If you want to know anything, sir, hadn't you better ask himself? He's at home to-night. I left him and my missus going to their tea."

"Left them at home, and at tea?"

"Yes, Miss Hilary."

It was an inexpressible relief. For the discovery must have come. From Mr. Ascott's message Ascott must certainly have guessed that the forgery was discovered: he must have confessed all to his aunt, or

have done two things which her sister knew she strongly disliked—sending Elizabeth wandering through London at night, and fetching Hilary home before the time. Yet they had been left sitting quietly at their tea!

Perhaps, after all, the blow had not been so dreadful. Johanna must have seen a ray of hope through it all. Vague hopes arose in Hilary also; visions of the poor sinner sitting "clothed and in his right mind," contrite and humbled; comforted by them all with the inexpressible tenderness with which we yearn over one who "was dead and is alive again, was lost, and is found;" helped by them all in the way that women—some women especially, and these sisters were of them—seem formed to help the erring and unfortunate. For, erring as he was, Ascott had also been unfortunate.

Many an excuse for him suggested itself to their pitiful hearts. How foolish of them, ignorant women that they were, to suppose that seventeen years of the most careful

bringing up could, with his temperament, enable him to stand firm against the countless dangers of London life—of any life, where a young man is left to himself in a great town, with his temptations so many, and his power of resistance so small.

And this might not, could not be a deliberate act. It must have been committed under a sudden impulse, to be repented of for the rest of his days. Nay, in the strange way in which our sins and mistakes are made not only the whips to scourge us, but the sicknesses which we often come out of—suffering and weak indeed, but yet relieved, and fresh and sound—who could tell but that this grave fault, this actual guilt, the climax of so many lesser errors, might not work in the end Ascott's complete reformation?

So in the strange way in which, after a great shock, we begin to revive a little, to hope against hope, to see a slender ray breaking through the darkness, Hilary composed herself, at least so far as to enable her to bid Elizabeth go down stairs, and get some supper.

"I will be ready directly. It seems the best thing I can do—to go home at once," said she.

"Certainly, my dear," replied Mr. Ascott, rather flattered by her involuntary appeal, and by an inward consciousness of his own exceeding generosity. "And pray, don't disturb yourselves. Tell your sister from me—your sister Selina, I mean—that I overlook everything, and the marriage shall go on as settled, on condition that you keep out of my sight—that young blackguard!"

"Oh, not that word!" cried Hilary, piteously.

"Well, I won't say it, though it 's his right name—a fellow who could—. Look you, Miss Hilary, when his father sent to me to beg ten pounds to bury his mother with, I did bury her, and him also, a month after, very respectably too, though he had no earthly claim upon me, except that he came from Stowbury. And I stood godfather to the child, and I've done my duty by him. But mark my words, what 's bred in the bone will come in the flesh. Ascott was born in a prison, and he'll die in a prison."

"God forbid!" said Hilary, solemnly. And again she felt the strong conviction that, whatever his father had been, or his mother, of whom they had heard nothing till she was dead, Ascott could not have lived all these years of his childhood and early boyhood with his three aunts at Stowbury without gaining at least some good, which might counteract the hereditary evil; as such evil can be counteracted, even as hereditary disease can be gradually removed by wholesome and careful rearing in a new generation.

"Well, I'll not say any more," continued Peter Ascott; "only, the sooner the young fellow takes himself off the better. He'll only plague you all. Now, can you send out for a cab for me?"

Hilary mechanically rang the bell, and gave the order.

"I'll take you to town with me, if you like. It'll save you the expense of the omnibus. I suppose you always travel by omnibus?"

Hilary answered something, she hardly knew what, except that it was a declining

of all these benevolent attentions. At last she got Mr. Ascott outside the street-door, and, returning, put her hand to her head with a moan.

"Oh, Miss Hilary, don't look like that!"

"Elizabeth, do you know what has happened?"

"No."

"Then I don't want you to know. And you must never try to find it out; for it is a secret that ought to be kept strictly within the family. Are you to be trusted?"

"Yes, Miss Hilary."

"Now, get me my bonnet, and let us make haste and go home."

They walked down the gas-lit Kensington High Street, Hilary taking her servant's arm, for she felt strangely weak. As she sat in the dark corner of the omnibus, she tried to look things in the face, and form some definite plan; but the noisy rumble at once dulled and confused her faculties. She felt capable of no consecutive thought, but found herself stupidly watching the two lines of faces, wondering, absently,

what sort of people they were; what were their lives and histories; and whether they all had, like herself, their own personal burthen of woe. Which was, alas! the one fact that never need be doubted in this world.

It was nigh upon eleven o'clock when Hilary knocked at the door of No. 15.

Miss Leaf opened it; but for the first time in her life she had no welcome for her child.

"Is it Ascott? I thought it was Ascott," she cried, peering eagerly up and down the street.

"He is gone out, then? When did he go?" asked Hilary, feeling her heart turn stone-cold.

"Just after Selina came in. She — she vexed him. But he cannot be long? Is not that man he?"

And just as she was, without shawl or bonnet, Johanna stepped out into the cold damp night, and strained her eyes into the darkness; but in vain.

"I'll walk round the Crescent once, and

maybe I shall find him. Only go in, Johanna."

And Hilary was away again into the dark, walking rapidly, less with the hope of finding Ascott than to get time to calm herself, so as to meet, and help her sisters to meet, this worst depth of their calamity. For something warned her that the last desperation of a weak nature is more to be dreaded than any overt obstinacy of a strong one. She had a conviction that Ascott never would come home.

After a while, they gave up waiting and watching at the front-door, and shut themselves up in the parlour. The first explanation past, even Selina ceased talking; and they sat together, the three women, doing nothing, attempting to do nothing, only listening; thinking every sound was a step on the pavement, or a knock at the door. Alas! what would they not have given for the fiercest knock, the most impatient, angry footstep, if only it had been their boy's?

About one o'clock, Selina had to be put

to bed in strong hysterics. She had lashed her nephew with her bitter tongue till he had rushed out of the house, declaring that none of them should ever see his face again. Now she reproached herself as being the cause of all, and fell into an agony of remorse, which engrossed her sisters' whole care; until, her violent emotion having worn itself out, she went to sleep, the only one who did sleep in that miserable family.

For Elizabeth also, having been sent to bed hours before, was found by Miss Hilary sitting on the kitchen stairs, about four in the morning. Her mistress made no attempt at reproach, but brought her into the parlour to share their silent watch. It was continued, and never broken except to make up the fire or light a fresh candle; till candles burnt out, and shutters were opened, and upon their great calamity stared the broad unwelcome day.

CHAPTER IV.

"MISSING"—"Lost"—"To —"—all the initials of the alphabet — we read these sort of advertisements in the newspapers; and unless there happens to be in them something intensely pathetic, comical, or horrible, we think very little about them. Only those who have undergone all that such an advertisement implies, can understand its depth of misery: the sudden missing of the person out of the home-circle, whether going away in anger, or driven away by terror or disgrace; the hour after hour and day after day of agonised suspense; the self-reproach, real or imaginary, lest anything might have been said or done that was not said or done — anything prevented that was not prevented; the gnawing remorse for some cruel, or careless, or bitter word that could so easily have been avoided.

Alas! if people could only be made to feel that every word, every action, carries with it the weight of an eternity; that the merest chance may make something said or done quite unpremeditatedly, in vexation, sullenness, or spite, the *last* action, the *last* word; which may grow into an awful remembrance, rising up between us and the irredeemable past, and blackening the future for years.

Selina was quite sure her unhappy nephew had committed suicide, and that she had been the cause of it. This conviction she impressed incessantly on her two sisters, as they waited upon her, or sat talking by her bedside during that long Saturday, when there was nothing else to be done.

That was the misery of it. There was nothing to be done. They had not the slightest clue to Ascott's haunts or associates. With the last lingering of honest shame, or honest respect for his aunts, he had kept all these things to himself. To search for him in wide London was altogether impossible.

Two courses suggested themselves to Hilary — one, to go and consult Miss Balquidder; the other — which came into her mind from some similar case she had heard of — to set on foot inquiries at all police-stations. But the first idea was soon rejected: only at the last extremity could she make patent the family misery, the family disgrace. To the second, similar and even stronger reasons applied. There was something about the cool, matter-of-fact, business-like act of setting a detective officer to hunt out their nephew, from which these poor women recoiled. Besides, impressed as he was — he had told his aunt Johanna so — with the relentlessness of Mr. Ascott, might not the chance of his discovering that he was hunted, drive him to desperation?

Hardly to suicide. Hilary steadfastly disbelieved in that. When Selina painted horrible pictures of his throwing himself off Waterloo Bridge; or being found hanging to a tree in one of the parks; or locking himself in a hotel bed-chamber, and blow-

ing out his brains, her younger sister only laughed — laughed as much as she could — if but to keep Johanna quiet.

Yet she herself had few fears. For she knew that Ascott was, in a sense, too cowardly to kill himself. He so disliked physical pain; physical unpleasantness of all kinds. She felt sure he would stop short, even with the razor or the pistol in his hand, rather than do a thing so very disagreeable.

Nevertheless, in spite of herself, while she and her sisters sat together, hour after hour, in a stillness almost like that when there is a death in the house, these morbid terrors took a double size. Hilary ceased to treat them as ridiculous impossibilities, but began to argue them out rationally. The mere act of doing so made her recoil; for it seemed an acknowledgment that she was fighting, not with chimeras, but realities.

"It is twenty-four hours since he went," she reasoned. "If he had done anything desperate he would have done it at once, and

we should have heard of it long before now; ill news always travels fast. Besides, his name was marked on all his clothes in full. I did it myself. And his coat pockets were always stuffed with letters; he used to cram them in as soon as he received them, you know."

And at this small remembrance of one of his "ways," even though it was an unkind way, and had caused them many a pain from the want of confidence it showed, his poor fond aunts turned aside to hide their starting tears. The very phrase "he used to" seemed such an unconscious admission that his life with them was over and done: that he never would either please them or vex them any more.

Yet they took care that during the whole day everything should be done as if he were expected minute by minute; that Elizabeth should lay the fourth knife and fork at dinner, the fourth cup and saucer at tea. Elizabeth, who throughout had faithfully kept her pledge; who went about silently and unobservantly, and by every

means in her power put aside the curiosity of Mrs. Jones as to what could be the reason that her lodgers had sat up all night, and what on earth had become of young Mr. Leaf.

After tea, Johanna, quite worn out, consented to go to bed; and then Hilary, left to her own responsibility, set herself to consider how long this dreadful quietness was to last, whether nothing could be done. She could endure whatever was inevitable, but it was against her nature, as well as her conscience, to sit down tamely to endure anything, till it really did become inevitable.

In the first place, she determined on that which a certain delicate sense of honour, as well as the fear of vexing him should he come home, had hitherto prevented—the examining of Ascott's room, drawers, clothes, and papers. It was a very dreary business — almost like doing the like to a person who was dead, only without the sad sanctity that belongs to the dead, whose very errors are forgotten and forgiven, who can neither suffer nor make others suffer any more.

Many things she found, and more she guessed at—things which stabbed her to the heart, things that she never told, not even to Johanna; but she found no clue whatever to Ascott's whereabouts, intentions, or connexions. One thing, however, struck her—that most of his clothes, and all his somewhat extensive stock of jewellery, were gone; everything, in short, that could be convertible into money. It was evident that his flight, sudden as it was, had been premeditated as at least a possibility.

This so far was satisfactory. It took away the one haunting fear of his committing suicide; and made it likely that he was still lingering about, hiding from justice and Mr. Ascott, or perhaps waiting for an opportunity to escape from England, from the fear that his godfather, even if not prosecuting him, had the power and doubtless the will completely to crush his future, wherever he was known.

Where could he go? His aunt tried to think over every word he had ever let fall about America, Australia, or any other

place to which the hopeless outlaws of this country fly; but she could recollect nothing to enable her to form any conclusion. One thing only she was sure of—that if once he went away, his own words would come true; they would never see his face again. The last tie, the last constraint that bound him to a home and a steady, righteous life would be broken: he would go all adrift, be tossed hither and thither on every wave of circumstance — what *he* called circumstance — till Heaven only knew what a total wreck he might speedily become, or in what forlorn and far-off seas his ruined life might go down. He, Ascott Leaf, the last of the name and family.

"It cannot be; it shall not be," cried Hilary—a sharp, bitter cry of resistance to the death; and her heart seemed to go out to the wretched boy, and her hands to clutch at him, as if he were drowning, and she were the only one to save him. How could she do it?

If she could get at him, by word or letter! But that seemed impossible, until,

turning over scheme after scheme, she suddenly thought of the one which so many people had tried in similar circumstances, and which she remembered they had talked over and laughed over, they and Ascott, one Sunday evening not so very long ago. This was—a *Times* advertisement.

The difficulty how to word it, so as to catch his attention, and yet escape publicity, was very great, especially as his initials were so common. Hundreds of "A. L.'s" might be wandering away from home, to whom all that she dared say to call Ascott back would equally apply. At last a bright thought struck her.

"A leaf" (with a small *l*) "will be quite safe wherever found. Come. Saturday. 15."

As she wrote it—this wretched *double entendre*—she was seized with that sudden sense of the ludicrous which sometimes intrudes in such a ghastly fashion in the very midst of great misery. She burst into uncontrollable laughter, fit after fit; so violent, that Elizabeth, who came in by

chance, was terrified out of her wits ; and kneeling beside her mistress, implored her to be quiet. At last the paroxysm ended in complete exhaustion. The tension of the last twenty-four hours had given way ; and Hilary knew her strength was gone. Yet the advertisement ought to be taken to the *Times* office that very night, in order to be inserted without fail on Monday morning.

There was but one person whom she could trust—Elizabeth.

She looked at the girl, who was kneeling beside the sofa, rubbing her feet, and sometimes casting a glance round, in the quiet way of one well used to nursing, who can find out how the sufferer is without "fussing" with questions. She noticed, probably because she had seen little of her of late, a curious change in Elizabeth. It must have been gradual, but yet its result had never been so apparent before. Her brusqueness had softened down, and there had come into her and shone out of her, spite of all her natural uncomeliness of

person, that beautiful, intangible something, common alike to peasant and queen, as clear to see and as sad to miss in both—womanliness. Added thereto was the gentle composure of mien which almost invariably accompanies it, which instinctively makes you feel that in great things or small, whatever the woman has to do, she will do it in the womanliest, wisest, and best way.

So thought Miss Hilary, as she lay watching her servant, and then explained to her the errand upon which she wished to send her.

Not much explanation, for she merely gave her the advertisement to read, and told her what she wished done with it. And Elizabeth, on her part, asked no questions; but simply listened and obeyed.

After she was gone, Hilary lay on the sofa, passive and motionless. Her strength and activity seemed to have collapsed at once into that quietness which comes when one has endured to the utmost limit of endurance, when one feels as if to speak

a word or to lift a finger would be as much as life was worth.

"Oh, if I could only go to sleep!" was all she thought.

After a time, sleep did come; and she was taken far away out of these miseries. By the strange peculiarity of dreams, that we so seldom dream about any grief that oppresses us at the time, but generally of something quite different, she thought she was in some known unknown land, lovely and beautiful, with blue hills rising in the distance, and blue seas creeping and curling on to the shore. On this shore she was walking with Robert Lyon, just as he used to be, with his true face and honest voice. He did not talk to her much; but she felt him there, and knew they had but one heart between them. A heart which had never once swerved, either from the other; a heart, whole and sound, into which the least unfaith had never come, that had never known, or recognised even as a possibility, the first sore doubt, the ominous

> Little rift within the lute,
> That by-and-bye will make the music mute,
> And ever widening slowly silence all.

Is it ever so in this world? Does God ever bring the faithful man to the faithful woman, and make them love one another with a righteous, holy, persistent tenderness, which dare look in His face, nor be ashamed; which sees in this life only the beginning of the life to come; and in the closest, most passionate human love something to be held with a loose hand, something frail as glass and brittle as straw, unless it is perfected and sanctified by the love divine?

Hilary at least believed so. And when at Elizabeth's knock she woke with a start, and saw—not the sweet sea-shore and Robert Lyon, but the dull parlour, and the last flicker of the fire, she thanked God that her dream was not all a dream; that sharp as her misery was, it did not touch this—the love of her heart: she believed in Robert Lyon still.

And so she rose and spoke quite cheerfully, asking Elizabeth how she had ma-

naged, and whether the advertisement would be sure to be in on Monday morning.

"Yes, Miss Hilary; it is sure to be all right."

And then the girl hung about the room in an uneasy way, as if she had something to tell, which was the fact.

Elizabeth had had an adventure. It was a new thing in her monotonous life; it brightened her eyes, and flushed her cheeks, and made her old nervousness of manner return. More especially as she was somewhat perplexed, being divided in her mind between the wish she had to tell her mistress everything, and the fear to trouble her, at this troublous time, with any small matter that merely concerned herself.

The matter was this. When she had given in her advertisement at the *Times* office, and was standing behind the counter waiting for her change and receipt, there stood beside her a young man, also waiting. She had hardly noticed him, till on his talking to the clerk about some misprint in his advertisement, apparently one of the

great column of "Want Places," her ear was caught by the unmistakable Stowbury accent.

It was the first time she had heard it since she left home, and to Elizabeth's tenacious nature home in absence had gained an additional charm, had grown to be the one place in the world about which her affections clung. In these dreary wilds of London, to hear a Stowbury tongue, to catch sight of a Stowbury person, or even one who might know Stowbury, made her heart leap up with a bound of joy. She turned suddenly, and looked intently at the young man, or rather the lad, for he seemed a mere lad, small, slight, and whiskerless.

"Well, Miss, I hope you'll know me again next time you meet me," said the young fellow. At which remark Elizabeth saw that he was neither so young nor so simple as she had at first thought. She drew back, very much ashamed, and colouring deeply.

Now, if Elizabeth ever looked anything like comely, it was when she blushed; for she had the delicate skin peculiar to the

young women of her district; and when the blood rushed through it, no cheek of lady fair ever assumed a brighter rose. That, or the natural vanity of man in being noticed by woman, caught the youth's attention.

"Come now, Miss, don't be shy or offended. Perhaps I'm going your way? Would you like company home?"

"No, thank you," said Elizabeth, with great dignity.

"Well, won't you even tell a fellow your name? Mine 's Tom Cliffe, and I live—"

"Cliffe! Are you little Tommy Cliffe, and do you come from Stowbury?"

And all Elizabeth's heart was in her eyes.

As has been said, she was of a specially tenacious nature. She liked few people, but those she did like she held very fast. Almost the only strong interest of her life, except Miss Hilary, had been the little boy whom she had snatched from under the horse's heels; and though he was rather a scapegrace, and cared little for her, and his mother was a decidedly objectionable wo-

man, she had clung to them both firmly till she lost sight of them.

Now, it was not to be expected that she should recognise in this London stranger the little lad whose life she had saved—a lad, too, from her beloved Stowbury—without a certain amount of emotion, at which the individual in question broadly stared.

"Bless your heart, I am Tommy Cliffe from Stowbury, sure enough. Who are you?"

"Elizabeth Hand."

Whereupon ensued a most friendly greeting. Tom declared he should have known her anywhere, and had never forgotten her—never! How far that was true or not, he certainly looked as if it were; and two great tears of pleasure dimmed Elizabeth's kind eyes.

"You've grown a man now, Tommy," said she, regarding him with a sort of half-maternal pride, and noticing his remarkably handsome and intelligent face—so intelligent that it would have attracted anyone,

though it was set upon broad, stooping shoulders, and a small, slight body. "Let me see; how old are you?"

"I'm nineteen, I think."

"And I'm two-and-twenty. How aged we are growing!" said Elizabeth, with a smile.

Then she asked after Mrs. Cliffe, but got only the brief answer, "Mother's dead," given in a tone as if no more inquiries would be welcome. His two sisters, also, had died of typhus in one week, and Tom had been "on his own hook," as he expressed it, for the last three years.

He was extremely frank and confidential; told her how he had begun life as a printer's "devil," afterwards become a compositor, and, his health failing, had left the trade, and gone as servant to a literary gentleman.

"An uncommon clever fellow is master; keeps his carriage, and has dukes to dinner, all out of his books. Maybe you've heard of them, Elizabeth?" and he named a few, in a patronising way; at which Elizabeth smiled, for she knew them well. But she

nevertheless regarded with a certain awe the servant of so great a man, and "little Tommy Cliffe" took a new importance in her eyes.

Also, as he walked with her along the street to find an omnibus, she could not help perceiving what a sharp, clever fellow he had become; how, like many another printer's boy, he had caught the influence of the atmosphere of letters, and was educated—self-educated, of course—to a degree far beyond his position. While she looked at him, and listened to him, Elizabeth involuntarily thought of Benjamin Franklin, and of many more who had raised themselves from the inkpot and the compositor's desk to fame and eminence, and she fancied that such might be the lot of "little Tommy Cliffe." Why not? If so, how excessively proud she should be!

For the moment, she had forgotten her errand; forgotten even Miss Hilary. It was not till Tom Cliffe asked her where she lived, that she suddenly recollected her mistress might not wish, under present

circumstances, for their abode, or anything concerning them, to be known to a Stowbury person.

It was a struggle. She would have liked to see the lad again; have liked to talk over with him Stowbury things and Stowbury people; but she felt she ought not to do it, and she would not.

"Tell me where you live, Tom, and that will do just as well; at least till I speak to my mistress about you. I never had a visitor before, and my mistress might not like it."

"No followers allowed, eh?"

Elizabeth laughed. The idea of little Tommy Cliffe as her "follower" seemed so very funny.

So she bade him good-bye; having, thanks to his gay frankness, been made acquainted with all about him, but leaving him in perfect ignorance concerning herself and her mistresses. She only smiled when he declared contemptuously, and with rather a romantic emphasis, that he would hunt her out, though it were half over London.

This was all her adventure. When she came to tell it, it seemed very little to tell, and Miss Hilary listened to it rather indifferently, trying hard to remember who Tommy Cliffe was, and to take an interest in him because he came from Stowbury. But Stowbury days were so far off now—with such a gulf of pain between.

Suddenly the same fear occurred to her that had occurred to Elizabeth.

"The lad did not see the advertisement, I hope? You did not tell him about us?"

"I told him nothing," said Elizabeth, speaking softly, and looking down. "I did not even mention anybody's name."

"That was right; thank you."

But oh, the bitterness of knowing, and feeling sure Elizabeth knew too, the thing for which she thanked her; and that not to mention Ascott's name was the greatest kindness the faithful servant could show towards Ascott's family.

CHAPTER V.

Ascott Leaf never came home.

Day after day appeared the advertisement, sometimes slightly altered, as hope or fear suggested; but no word, no letter, no answer of any kind, reached the anxious women.

At length, moved by their distress, or perhaps feeling that the scapegrace would be safer got rid of if found and despatched abroad in some decent manner, Mr. Ascott himself took measures for privately continuing the search. Every outward-bound ship was examined; every hospital visited; every case of suicide investigated; but in vain. The unhappy young man had disappeared, suddenly and completely, as many another has disappeared, out of the home-circle, and been never heard of more.

It is difficult to understand how a family can possibly bear such a sorrow, did we not know that many have had to bear it, and have borne it, with all its load of agonising suspense, slowly dying hope—

The hope that keeps alive despair—

settling down into a permanent grief, compared with which the grief for loss by death is light and endurable.

The Leaf family went through all this. Was it better or worse for them that their anguish had to be secret?—that there were no friends to pity, inquire, or console?—that Johanna had to sit hour by hour and day by day in the solitary parlour, Selina having soon gone back to her old ways of "gadding about," and her marriage preparations; and that, hardest of all, Hilary had on the Monday morning to return to Kensington, and work, work, work, as if nothing were amiss?

But it was natural that all this should tell upon her; and one day Miss Balquidder said, after a long covert observation of her

face, "My dear, you look ill. Is there anything troubling you? My young people always tell me their troubles, bodily or mental. I doctor both."

"I am sure of it," said Hilary, with a sad smile, but entered into no explanation; and Miss Balquidder had the wise kindliness to inquire no further. Nevertheless, on some errand or other she came to Kensington nearly every evening, and took Hilary back with her to sleep at No. 15.

"Your sister Selina must wish to have you with her as much as possible till she is married," she said, as a reason for doing this.

And Hilary acquiesced, but silently, as we often do acquiesce in what ought to be the truth, but which we know to be the saddest, most painful falsehood.

For Selina, it became plain to see, was one of the family no more. After her first burst of self-reproachful grief, she took Mr. Ascott's view of her nephew's loss—that it was a good riddance; went on calmly with her bridal preparations, and seemed only

afraid lest anything should interfere to prevent her marriage.

But the danger was apparently tided over. No news of Ascott came. Even the daily inquiries for him by his creditors had ceased. His aunt Selina was beginning to breathe freely, when, the morning before the wedding-day, as they were all sitting in the midst of white finery, but as sadly and silently as if instead of a marriage they were preparing for a funeral, a person was suddenly shown in "on business."

It was a detective officer, sent to find out from Ascott Leaf's aunts whether there was the least chance of his lurking-place being discovered. If not, his principal creditor, thoroughly exasperated, had determined on advertising him in the public papers as having "absconded."

At this intelligence the three aunts were utterly overwhelmed. They made no "scene"—not even Selina; a certain sense of pride kept these poor gentlewomen from betraying their misery to a strange man; though he was a very civil man, and

having delivered himself of his errand, like an automaton, sat looking into his hat, and taking no notice of aught around him. He was accustomed to this sort of thing.

Hilary was the first to recover herself. She glanced round at her sisters, but they had not a word to say. In any crisis of family difficulty they always left her to take the helm.

Rapidly she ran over in her mind all the consequences that would arise from this new trouble; the public disgrace; Mr. Ascott's anger and annoyance—not that she cared much for this, except so far as it would affect Selina. Lastly, the death-blow it would prove to any possible hope of reclaiming the poor prodigal—who she did not believe was dead, but might still return from his wanderings and his swine's husks, to have the fatted calf killed for him and glad tears shed over him. That is, if he were let alone. But after the public ignominy of being advertised in the *Times* as "absconded," Ascott never could, never would, come home any more.

Taking as cool and business-like a tone as she could, she addressed herself to the detective.

"This is a summary proceeding. Is there no way of avoiding it?"

"One only, Miss," replied the man, very respectfully. "If the family would pay the debt."

"Do you know how much it amounts to?"

"Eighty pounds."

"Ah!"

That hopeless sigh of Johanna's was sufficient answer, though no one spoke.

But in desperate cases some women acquire a desperate courage, or rather it is less courage than faith—the faith which is said to "remove mountains," the belief that to the very last there must be something to be done, and, if it can be done, they will have strength to do it. True, the mountain may not be removed, but the mere act of faith sometimes teaches one how to climb over it.

"Eighty pounds, is it? Very well. Your employer must be aware that his only chance of payment from the family is by respecting

their feelings. Tell him if he will agree to suppress the advertisement, in two days he shall hear from us, and we will make arrangements about paying the debt."

Hilary said this, to her sisters' utter astonishment; so utter that they let her say it, and let the detective go away with a civil "Good morning," before they interfered or contradicted her by a word. Then Selina exclaimed—

"Pay the debt! Hilary, what have you promised? It is an impossibility."

"Like the Frenchman's answer to his mistress—'Madame, if it had been possible, it would have been done already; if it is impossible, it shall be done.' It shall, I say."

"I wonder you can jest about our misfortunes," said Selina, in her most querulous voice.

"I'm not jesting. But where is the use of sitting down to moan? I mean what I say. The thing *must* be done."

Her eyes glittered—her small red lips were set tightly together.

"If it is not done, sisters—if his public disgrace is not prevented, don't you see the result? Not as regards your marriage, Selina—the man must be a coward who would refuse to marry a woman whom he cared for, even though her nearest kinsman had been hanged at the Old Bailey—but as regards Ascott himself. The boy is not a bad boy, though he has done wickedly; but there is a difference between a wicked act and a wicked nature. I mean to save him if I can."

"How?"

"By saving his good name; by paying the debt."

"And where on earth shall you get the money?"

"I will go to Miss Balquidder and—"

"Borrow it?"

"No; never! I would as soon think of stealing it."

Then controlling herself, Hilary explained that she meant to ask Miss Balquidder to arrange with the creditor to pay the eighty pounds by certain weekly or monthly in-

stalments, to be deducted from her salary at Kensington.

"It is not a very great favour to ask of her: merely that she should say, 'This young woman is employed by me: I believe her to be honest, respectable, and so forth: also, that when she makes a promise to pay, she will to the best of her power perform it.' A character which is at present rather a novelty in the Leaf family."

"Hilary!"

"I am growing bitter, Johanna; I know I am. Why should we suffer so much? Why should we be always dragged down—down—in this way? Why should we never have had any one to cherish and take care of us, like other women? Why—"

Miss Leaf laid her finger on her child's lips—

"Because it is the will of God."

Hilary flung herself on her dear old sister's neck, and burst into tears.

Selina, too, cried a little, and said that she should like to help in paying the debt,

if Mr. Ascott had no objection. And then she returned to her white splendours, and became absorbed in the annoyance of there being far too much clematis and far too little orange-blossom in the bridal bonnet—which it was now too late to change. A little, also, she vexed herself about the risk of confiding in Miss Balquidder, lest by any chance the story might get round to Russell Square; and was urgent that at least nothing should be said or done until after to-morrow. She was determined to be married, and dreaded any slip between the cup and the lip.

But Hilary was resolute. "I said that in two days the matter should be arranged, and so it must be, or the creditor will think we too break our promises."

"You can assure him to the contrary," said Selina with dignity. "In fact, why can't you arrange with him yourself without going at all to Miss Balquidder?"

Again the fierce, bitter expression returned to Hilary's face.

"You forget, Miss Balquidder's honest

name is his only guarantee against the dishonesty of ours."

"Hilary, you disgrace us—disgrace me—by speaking in such a way. Are we not gentlewomen?"

"I don't know, Selina. I don't seem to know or to feel anything, except that I would live on bread and water, in order to live peaceably and honestly. Oh, will it ever, ever be?"

She walked up and down the parlour, disarranging the white draperies which lay about, feeling unutterable contempt for them and for her sister. Angry and miserable, with every nerve quivering, she was at war with the whole world.

This feeling lasted even when, after some discussion, she gained her point, and was on her way to call on Miss Balquidder. She went round and round the square many times, trying to fix in her mind word for word what she meant to say; revealing no more of the family history than was absolutely necessary, and stating her business in the briefest, hardest, most matter-

of-fact way—putting it as a transaction between employer and employed, in which there was no more favour asked or bestowed than could possibly be avoided. And, as the sharp east wind blew across her at every corner, minute by minute she felt herself growing more fierce, and hard, and cold.

"This will never do. I shall be downright wicked soon. I must go in and get it over."

Perhaps it was as well. Well for her morally as physically, that there should have been that sudden change from the blighting weather outside to the warm, well-lighted room, where the good rich woman sat at her early and solitary tea.

Very solitary it looked—the little table in the centre of that large, handsome parlour, with the one cup and saucer, the one easy chair. And as Hilary entered, she noticed, amidst all this comfort and luxury, the still, grave, almost sad expression which solitary people always get to wear.

But the next minute Miss Balquidder had turned round, and risen, smiling.

"Miss Leaf, how very kind of you to

come and see me! Just the day before the wedding, too, when you must be so busy. Sit down, and tell me all about it. But first, my dear, how wet your boots are! Let me take them off at once."

Which she did, sending for her own big slippers, and putting them on the tiny feet with her own hands.

Hilary submitted—in truth, she was too much surprised to resist.

Miss Balquidder had, like most folk, her opinions or "crotchets"—as they might be—and one of them was, to keep her business and friendly relations entirely distinct and apart. Whenever she went to Kensington or her other establishments, she was always emphatically "the mistress"—a kindly and even motherly mistress, certainly—but still authoritative, decided. Moreover, it was her invariable rule to treat all her *employées* alike—"making no step-bairns" among them. Thus, for some time it had happened that Hilary had been, and felt herself to be, just Miss Leaf, the book-keeper, doing her duty to Miss Bal-

quidder, her employer, and neither expecting nor attaining any closer relation.

But in her own house, or it might be from the sudden apparition of that young face at her lonely fireside, Miss Balquidder appeared quite different.

A small thing touches a heart that is sore with trouble. When the good woman rose up—after patting the little feet, and approving loudly of the woollen stockings—she saw that Hilary's whole face was quivering with the effort to keep back her tears.

There are some women of whom one feels by instinct that they were, as Miss Balquidder had once jokingly said of herself, specially meant to be mothers. And though, in its strange providence, Heaven often denies the maternity, it cannot and does not mean to shut up the well-spring of that maternal passion—truly a passion to such women as these, almost as strong as the passion of love—but lets the stream, which might otherwise have blessed one child or one family, flow out wide and far, blessing wherever it goes.

In a tone that somehow touched every fibre of Hilary's heart, Miss Balquidder said, placing her on a low chair beside her own—

"My dear, you are in trouble. I saw it a week or two ago, but did not like to speak. Could n't you say it out, and let me help you? You need not be afraid. I never tell anything, and everybody tells everything to me."

That was true. Added to this said motherliness of hers, Miss Balquidder possessed that faculty which some people have in a remarkable degree, and some—very good people too—are totally deficient in, of attracting confidence. The secrets she had been trusted with, the romances she had been mixed up in, the Quixotic acts she had been called upon to perform during her long life, would have made a novel—or several novels—such as no novelist could dare to write, for the public would condemn them as impossible and unnatural. But all this experience—though happily it could never be put into a book—had

given to the woman herself a view of human nature at once so large, lenient, and just, that she was the best person possible to hear the strange and pitiful story of young Ascott Leaf.

How it came out, Hilary hardly knew; she seemed to have told very little, and yet Miss Balquidder guessed it all. It did not appear either to surprise or shock her, She neither began to question nor preach; she only laid her hand, her large, motherly, protecting hand, on the bowed head, saying—

"How much you must have suffered, my poor bairn!"

The soft Scotch tone and word—the grave, quiet Scotch manner, implying more than it even expressed—was it wonderful if underlying as well as outside influences made Hilary completely give way?

Robert Lyon had had a mother, who died when he was seventeen, but of whom he kept the tenderest remembrance, often saying that of all the ladies he had met with in the world, there was none equal to her—the strong, tender, womanly, pea-

sant woman—refined in mind and word and ways—though to the last day of her life she spoke broad Scotch, and did the work of her cottage with her own hands. It seems as if that mother—towards whom Hilary's fancy had clung, lovingly as a woman ought to cling, above all others, to the mother of the man she loves—were speaking to her now, comforting her and helping her—comfort and help that it would have been sweeter to receive from her than from any woman living.

A mere fancy; but in her state of long uncontrolled excitement, it took such possession of her that Hilary fell on her knees, and hid her face in Miss Balquidder's lap, sobbing aloud.

The other was a little surprised; it was not her Scotch way to yield to emotion before folk; but she was a wise woman, she asked no questions—merely held the quivering hands and smoothed the throbbing head, till composure returned. Some people have a magical, mesmeric power of soothing and controlling: it was hers.

When she took the poor face between her hands, and looked straight into the eyes, with, "There, you are better now," Hilary returned the gaze as steadily, nay, smilingly, and rose.

"Now, may I tell you my business?"

"Certainly, my dear. When one's friends are in trouble, the last thing one ought to do is to sit down beside them and moan. Did you come to ask my advice, or had you any definite plan of your own?"

"I had." And Hilary told it.

"A very good plan, and very generous in you to think of it. But I see two strong objections: first, whether it can be carried out; secondly, whether it ought."

Hilary shrank sensitively.

"Not on my account, my dear, but your own. I often see people making martyrs of themselves for some worthless character on whom the sacrifice is utterly wasted. I object to this, as I would object to throwing myself or my friend into a blazing house, unless I were morally certain there was a life to be saved. Is there in this case?"

"I think there is! I trust in Heaven there is!" said Hilary, earnestly.

There was both pleasure and pity expressed in Miss Balquidder's countenance as she replied:—"Be it so: that is a matter on which no one can judge except yourself. But on the other matter you ask my advice, and I must give it. To maintain two ladies, and pay a debt of eighty pounds, out of one hundred a year, is simply impossible."

"With Johanna's income and mine it will be a hundred and twenty pounds and some odd shillings a year."

"You accurate girl! But even with this it cannot be done, unless you were to live in a manner so restricted in the commonest comforts, that at your sister's age she would be sure to suffer. You must look on the question from all sides, my dear. You must be just to others, as well as to that young man, who seems never to— But I will leave him unjudged."

They were both silent for a minute; and then Miss Balquidder said:—"I feel certain there is but one rational way of accom-

plishing the thing, if you are bent upon doing it, if your own judgment and conscience tell you it ought to be done. Is it so?"

"Yes," said Hilary, firmly.

The old Scotchwoman took her hand with a warm pressure. "Very well. I don't blame you. I might have done the same myself. Now to my plan. Miss Leaf, have you known me long enough to confer on me the benediction—one of the few that we rich folk possess—'It is more blessed to give than to receive?'"

"I don't quite understand."

"Then allow me to explain. I happen to know this creditor of your nephew's. He being a tailor and an outfitter, we have had dealings together in former times, and I know him to be a hard man, an unprincipled man, such a one as no young woman should have to do with, even in business relations. To be in his power, as you would be for some years, if your scheme of gradual payment were carried out, is the last thing I should desire for you. Let me

suggest another way. Take me for your creditor instead of him. Pay him at once, and I will write you a cheque for the amount."

The thing was put so delicately, in such an ordinary manner, as if it were a mere business arrangement, that at first Hilary hardly perceived all that it implied. When she did; when she found that it was in plain terms a loan of eighty pounds, offered by a person almost a stranger, she was at first quite bewildered. Then (ah! let us not blame her if she carried to a morbid excess that noble independence which is the foundation of all true dignity in man or woman) she shrank back into herself, overcome with annoyance and shame. At last she forced herself to say, though the words came out rather coldly—

"You are very good, and I am exceedingly obliged to you; but I never borrowed money in my life. I could not do it."

"Very well: I can understand your feelings, and I beg your pardon for offering it," replied Miss Balquidder, also somewhat coldly.

They sat silent and awkward, and then the elder lady took out a pencil, and began to make calculations in her memorandum-book.

"I am reckoning what is the largest sum per month that you could reasonably be expected to spare, and how you may make the most of what remains. Are you aware that London lodgings are very expensive? I am thinking that if you were to exchange out of the Kensington shop into another I have at Richmond, I could offer you the first floor above it for much less rent than you pay Mrs. Jones; and you could have your sister living with you."

"Ah! that would make us both so much happier! How good you are!"

"You will see, I only wish to help you to help yourself; not to put you under any obligation. Though I cannot see anything so very terrible in your being slightly indebted to an old woman, who has neither chick nor child, and is at perfect liberty to do what she likes with her own."

There was a pathos in the tone which smote Hilary into quick contrition.

"Forgive me! But I have such a horror of borrowing money—you must see why, after what I have told you of our family. You must surely understand"—

"I do, fully; but there are limits even to independence. A person who, for his own pleasure, is ready to take money from anybody and everybody, without the slightest prospect or intention of returning it, is quite different from a friend who, in a case of emergency, accepts help from another friend, being ready and willing to take every means of repayment, as I knew you were, and meant you to be. I meant, as you suggested, to stop out of your salary so much per month, till I had my eighty pounds safe back again."

"But suppose you never had it back? I am young and strong; still I might fall ill—I might die, and you never be repaid."

"Yes, I should," said Miss Balquidder, with a serious smile. "You forget, my dear bairn—'*Inasmuch as ye have done it to one of these little ones, ye have done it unto* ME.' '*He that giveth to the poor lendeth to*

the LORD.' I have lent Him a good deal at different times, and He has always paid me back with usury."

There was something quaint and solemn —also, a little sad, in the way the old lady spoke. Hilary forgot her own side of the subject; her pride, her humiliation.

"But do you not think, Miss Balquidder, that one ought to work on, struggle on, to the last extremity, before one accepts an obligation, most of all a money obligation?"

"I do, as a general principle. Yet money is not the greatest thing in this world, that a pecuniary debt should be the worst to bear. And sometimes one of the kindest acts you can do to a fellow-creature—one that touches and softens his heart, nay, perhaps wins it to you for life, is to accept a favour from him."

Hilary made no reply.

"I speak a little from experience. I have not had a very happy life myself; at least most people would say so if they knew it; but the Lord has made it up to me by giving me the means of bringing happiness,

in money as well as other ways, to other people. Most of us have our favourite luxuries; this is mine. I like to do people good; I like also—though maybe that is a mean weakness—to feel that I do it. If all whom I have been made instrumental in helping had said to me, as you have done, 'I will not be helped, I will not be made happy,' it would have been rather hard for me."

And a smile, half humorous, half sad, came over the hard-featured face, spiritualising its whole expression.

Hilary wavered. She compared her own life, happy still, and hopeful, for all its cares, with that of this lonely woman, whose only blessing was her riches, except the generous heart which sanctified them, and made them such. Humbled, nay, ashamed, she took and kissed the kindly hand which had succoured so many, yet which, in the inscrutable mystery of Providence, had been left to go down to the grave alone; missing all that is personal, dear, and precious to a woman's heart, and getting

instead only what Hilary now gave her—the half-sweet, half-bitter payment of gratitude.

"Well, my bairn, what is to be done?"

"I will do whatever you think right," murmured Hilary.

CHAPTER VI.

It was not a cheerful morning on which to be married. A dense, yellow, London fog, the like of which the Misses Leaf had never yet seen, penetrated into every corner of the parlour at No. 15, where they were breakfasting drearily by candlelight, all in their wedding attire. They had been up since six in the morning, and Elizabeth had dressed her three mistresses one after the other, taking exceeding pleasure in the performance. For she was still little more than a girl, to whom a wedding was a wedding, and this was the first she had ever had to do with in her life.

True, it disappointed her in some things, She was a little surprised that the last evening had passed off just like all other evenings. The interest and bustle of packing soon

subsided—the packing consisting only of the travelling-trunk, for the rest of the *trousseau* went straight to Russell Square, every means having been taken to ignore the very existence of No. 15; and then the three ladies had supper as usual, and went to bed at their customary hour, separating without any special demonstration of emotion or affection. To Elizabeth this was strange. She had not yet learnt the unspeakable bitterness of a parting where nobody has any grief to restrain.

On a wedding morning, of course, there is no time to be spared for sentiment. The principal business appeared to be dressing. Mr. Ascott had insisted on doing his part in making his new connexions appear "respectable" at his marriage, and for Selina's sake they had consented. Indeed, it was inevitable: they had no money whatever to clothe themselves withal. They must either have accepted Mr. Ascott's gifts—in which, to do him justice, he was both thoughtful and liberal—or they must have stayed away from the wedding alto-

gether, which they did not like to do, "for the sake of the family."

So, with a sense of doing their last duty by the sister, who would be, they felt, henceforward a sister no more, Miss Leaf attired herself in her violet silk and white China shawl, and Miss Hilary put on her silver-grey poplin, with a cardinal cape, as was then in fashion, trimmed with white swan's-down. It was rather an elderly costume for a bridesmaid; but she was determined to dress warmly, and not risk, in muslins and laces, the health which to her now was money, life—nay, honour.

For Ascott's creditor had been already paid: Miss Balquidder never let grass grow under her feet. When Hilary returned to her sisters that day, there was no longer any fear of public exposure; she had the receipted bill in her hand, and she was Miss Balquidder's debtor to the extent of eighty pounds.

But it was no debt of disgrace or humiliation, nor did she feel it as such. She had learned the lesson which the large-hearted

rich can always teach the poor, that, while there is sometimes, to some people, no more galling chain, there is to others—and these are the highest natures, too—no more firm and sacred bond than gratitude. But still the debt was there ; and Hilary would never feel quite easy till it was paid —in money, at least. The generosity she never wished to repay. She would rather feel it wrapping her round, like an arm that was heavy only through its exceeding tenderness, to the end of her days.

Nevertheless, she had arranged that there was to be a regular monthly deduction from her salary ; and how, by retrenchment, to make this monthly payment as large as she could, was a question which had occupied herself and Johanna for a good while after they retired to rest. For there was no time to be lost. Mrs. Jones must be given notice to ; and there was another notice to be given, if the Richmond plan were carried out ; another sad retrenchment, foreboding which, when Elizabeth brought up supper, Miss Hilary could

hardly look the girl in the face, and when she bade her good night, had felt almost like a secret conspirator.

For she knew that, if the money to clear this debt was to be saved, they must part with Elizabeth.

No doubt the personal sacrifice would be considerable, for Hilary would have to do the work of their two rooms with her own hands, and give up a hundred little comforts in which Elizabeth, now become a most clever and efficient servant, had made herself necessary to them both. But the two ladies did not think of that at the moment; they only thought of the pain of parting with her. They thought of it sorely, even though she was but a servant, and there was a family parting close at hand. Alas! people must take what they earn. It was a melancholy fact that, of the two impending losses, the person they should miss most would be—not their sister, but Elizabeth.

Both regrets combined made them sit at the breakfast-table—the last meal they

should ever take together as a family—sad and sorry, speaking about little else than the subject which presented itself as easiest and uppermost, namely, clothes.

Finally, they all stood completely arrayed, even to bonnets; Hilary looking wonderfully bewitching in hers, which was the very pattern of one that may still be seen in a youthful portrait of our gracious Queen—a large round brim, with a wreath of roses inside; while Miss Leaf's was somewhat like it, only with little bunches of white ribbon, "for," she said, "my time of roses is gone by." But her sweet faded face had a peace that was not in the other two—not even in Hilary's.

But the time arrived; the carriages drew up at the door. Then nature and sisterly feeling asserted themselves for a minute. Miss Selina "gave way," not to any loud or indecorous extent, to nothing that could in the least harm her white satin, or crumple her laces and ribbons; but she did shed a tear or two—real, honest tears—kissed her sisters affectionately, hoped they would

be very happy at Richmond, and that they would often come to see her at Russell Square.

"You know," said she, half apologetically, "it is a great deal better for one of us at least to be married and settled. Indeed I assure you, I have done it all for the good of my family."

And for the time being she devoutly believed she had.

So it was all over. Elizabeth herself, from the aisle of St. Pancras Church, watched the beginning and ending of the show; a very fine show, with a number of handsomely dressed people, wedding guests, who seemed to stare about them a good deal, and take little interest in either bride or bridegroom. The only persons Elizabeth recognised were her mistresses—Miss Leaf, who kept her veil down and never stirred; and Miss Hilary, who stood close behind the bride, listening with downcast eyes to the beautiful marriage service. It must have touched her, more than on her sister's account, for a tear gathered under each

eyelash, silently rolled down the soft cheek and fell.

"Miss Hilary 's an angel, and he 'll be a lucky man that gets *her*," meditated her faithful "bower-maiden" of old; as, a little excited by the event of the morning, she stood by the mantel-piece, and contemplated a letter which had come after the ladies departed—one of these regular monthly Indian letters—after which, Elizabeth was sharp enough to notice, Miss Hilary's step always grew lighter and her eye brighter, for many days.

"It must be a nice thing to have somebody fond of one, and somebody to be fond of," meditated she. And, "old-fashioned piece of goods" as she was—according to Mrs. Jones (who now, from the use she was in the Jones's *ménage*, patronised and confided in her extremely)—some little bit of womanly craving after the woman's one hope and crown of bliss crept into the poor maid-servant's heart. But it was not for the maid-servant's usual necessity—a "sweetheart"—somebody to "keep com-

pany with;" it was rather for somebody to love, and perhaps take care of a little. People love according to their natures; and Elizabeth's was a strong nature; its principal element being a capacity for passionate devotedness, almost unlimited in extent. Such women, who love most, are not always, indeed very rarely, loved best. And so it was perhaps as well that poor Elizabeth should make up her mind, as she did very composedly, that she herself should never be married; but after that glorious wedding of Miss Hilary's to Mr. Lyon, should settle down to take care of Miss Leaf all her days.

"And if I turn out only half as good and contented as my mistress, it can't be such a dreadful thing to be an old maid, after all," stoically said Elizabeth Hand.

The words were scarcely out of her mouth, when her attention was caught by some one in the passage inquiring for her; yes, actually for her. She could hardly believe her eyes when she perceived it was her new-found old acquaintance, Tom Cliffe.

He was dressed very well, out of livery; indeed, he looked so extremely like a gentleman, that Mrs. Jones's little girl took him for one, called him "Sir," and showed him into the parlour.

"All right. I thought this was the house. Uncommon sharp of me to hunt you out, wasn't it, Elizabeth?"

But Elizabeth was a little stiff, flurried, and perplexed. Her mistresses being away, she did not know whether she ought to ask Tom in, especially as it must be into the parlour; there was no other place to take him to.

However, Tom settled the matter with a conclusive, "Oh, gammon!"—sat down, and made himself quite comfortable. And Elizabeth was so glad to see him—glad to have another chance of talking about dear old Stowbury. It could not be wrong; she would not say a word about the family, not even tell him she lived with the Misses Leaf, if she could help it. And Tom did not seem the least inquisitive.

"Now, I call this quite a coincidence. I

was stopping at St. Pancras Church to look at a wedding; some old city fogie who lives in Russell Square, and is making a great splash; and there I see you, Elizabeth, standing in the crowd, and looking so nice and spicy; as fresh as an apple, and as brisk as a bee. I hummed and hawed and whistled, but I couldn't catch your eye; then I missed you, and was vexed above a bit, till I saw some one like you going in at this door, so I just knocked and asked; and here you are! 'Pon my life, I am very glad to see you."

"Thank you, Tom," said Elizabeth, pleased, even grateful for the trouble he had taken about her; she had so few friends; in truth, actually none.

They began to talk, and Tom Cliffe talked exceedingly well. He had added to his natural cleverness a degree of London sharpness, the result of much "knocking about" ever since childhood. Besides, his master, the literary gentleman, who had picked him out of the printing-office, had taken a deal of pains with him. Tom was,

for his station, a very intelligent and superior young man. Not a boy, though he was still under twenty, but a young man: that precocity of development which often accompanies a delicate constitution, making him appear, as he was indeed in mind and character, fully six or seven years older than his real age.

He was a handsome fellow, too, though small; dark-haired, dark-eyed, with regular and yet sensitive and mobile features. Altogether Tom Cliffe was decidedly interesting, and Elizabeth took great pleasure in looking at him, and in thinking, with a certain half-motherly, half-romantic satisfaction, that but for her, and her carrying him home from under the horse's heels, he might, humanly speaking, have been long ago buried in Stowbury churchyard.

"I have a 'churchyard cough' at times still," said he, when speaking of this little episode of early life. "I don't think I shall ever live to be a middle-aged man." And he shook his head, and looked melancholy and poetical; nay, even showed

Elizabeth some poetry that he himself had written on the subject, which was clever enough in its way.

Elizabeth's interest grew. An ordinary baker or butcher-boy would not have attracted her in the least; but here was something in the shape of a hero, somebody who at once touched her sympathies and roused her admiration. For Tom was quite as well-informed as she was herself; more so, indeed. He was one of the many shrewd and clever working men who were then beginning to rise up and think for themselves, and educate themselves. He attended classes at mechanics' institutions, and young men's debating societies; where every topic of the day, religion, politics, political economy, was handled freely, as the young do handle these serious things. He threw himself, heart and soul, into the new movement, which, like all revolutions, had at first its great and fatal dangers, but yet resulted in much good; clearing the political sky, and bringing all sorts of hidden abuses under

the sharp eyes of that great scourge of evil-doers—public opinion.

Yet Elizabeth, reared under the wing of the conservative Misses Leaf, was a little startled when Tom Cliffe, who apparently liked talking and being listened to, gave her a long dissertation on the true principles of the Charter, and how Frost, Williams, and Jones—names all but forgotten now—were very ill-used men, actual martyrs. She was more than startled—shocked indeed, until there came a reaction of the deepest pity—when he confessed that he never went to church. He saw no use in going, he said; the parsons were all shams, paid largely to chatter about what they did not understand; the only real religion was that which a man thought out for himself, and acted out for himself. Which was true enough, though only a half truth; and innocent Elizabeth did not see the other half.

But she was touched and carried away by the earnestness and enthusiasm of the lad, wild, fierce iconoclast as he was, ready

to cast down the whole fabric of Church and State; though without any personal hankering after lawless rights and low pleasures. His sole idol was, as he said, intellect, and that was his preservation.

Also, the fragile health which was betrayed in every flash of his eye, every flush of his sallow cheek, made Tom Cliffe, even in the two hours he stayed with her, come very close to Elizabeth's heart. It was such a warm heart, such a liberal heart, thinking so little of itself or of its own value.

So here began to be told the old story, familiar in kitchens as parlours; but, from the higher bringing-up of the two parties concerned, conducted in this case more after the fashion of the latter than the former.

Elizabeth Hand was an exceptional person, and Tom had the sense to see this at once. He paid her no coarse attentions, did not attempt to make love to her; but he liked her, and he let her see that he did. True, she was not pretty, and she was older than he; but that to a boy of nineteen is

rather flattering than otherwise. Also, for there is a law even under the blind mystery of likings and fallings in love — a certain weakness in him, that weakness which generally accompanies the poetical nature, clung to the quiet, solid, practical strength of hers. He liked to talk, and be listened to by those silent, admiring, gentle grey eyes; and he thought it very pleasant when, with a motherly prudence, she warned him to be careful over his cough, and gave him a flannel breastplate to protect his chest against the cold.

When he went away, Tom was so far in love, that, following the free and easy ways of his class, he attempted to give Elizabeth a kiss; but she drew back so hotly, that he begged her pardon, and slipped away rather confounded.

"That's an odd sort of young woman; there's something in her," said he to himself. "I'll get a kiss, though, by-and-bye."

Meanwhile Elizabeth, having forgotten all about her dinner, sat thinking, actually doing nothing but thinking, until within

half an hour of the time when her mistresses might be expected back. They were to go direct to the hotel, breakfast, wait till the newly-married couple had departed, and then come home. They would be sure to be weary, and want their tea.

So Elizabeth made everything ready for them, steadily putting Tom Cliffe out of her mind. One thing she was glad of, that talking so much about his own affairs, he had forgotten to inquire concerning hers, and was still quite ignorant even of her mistresses' name. He therefore could tell no tales of the Leaf family at Stowbury. Still, she determined at once to inform Miss Hilary that he had been here, but that, if she wished it, he should never come again. And it spoke well for her resolve, that, while resolving, she was startled to find how very sorry she should feel if Tom Cliffe never came again.

I know I am painting this young woman with a strangely tender conscience, a refinement of feeling and a general moral sensitiveness which people say is seldom or

never to be found in her rank of life. And why not? Because mistresses treat servants as servants, and not as women; because in the sharp, hard line they draw, at the outset, between themselves and their domestics, they give no chance for any womanliness to be developed. And therefore since human nature is weak, and without help from without a long degraded class can never rise, sweethearts will still come crawling through back entries and down at area-doors; mistresses will still have to dismiss, helpless and fallen, or brazen in iniquity, many a wretched girl who once was innocent; or, if nothing actually vicious results, may have many a good respectable servant who left to get married, return, complaining that her "young man," whom she knew so little about, has turned out a drunken scoundrel of a husband, who drives her back to her old comfortable "place" to beg for herself and her starving babies a morsel of bread.

When, with a vivid blush that she could not repress, Elizabeth told her mistress that

Tom Cliffe had been to see her, the latter replied at first carelessly, for her mind was pre-occupied. Then, her attention caught by the aforesaid blush, Miss Hilary asked—

"How old is the lad?"

"Nineteen."

"That's a bad age, Elizabeth. Too old to be a pet, and rather too young for a husband."

"I never thought of such a thing," said Elizabeth warmly—and honestly, at the time.

"Did he want to come and see you again?"

"He said so."

"Oh well, if he is a steady, respectable lad, there can be no objection. I should like to see him myself next time."

And then a sudden sharp recollection that there would likely be no next time, in their service at least, made Miss Hilary feel quite a hypocrite.

"Elizabeth," said she, "we will speak about Tom Cliffe—is not that his name?—by-and-bye. Now, as soon as tea is over,

my sister wants to talk to you. When you are ready, will you come upstairs?"

She spoke in an especially gentle tone, so that by no possibility could Elizabeth fancy they were displeased with her.

Now, knowing the circumstances of the family, Elizabeth's conscience had often smitten her that she must eat a great deal, and that her wages, paid regularly month by month, must make a great hole in her mistresses' income. She was, alack! a sad expense, and she tried to lighten her cost in every possible way. But it never struck her that they could do without her, or that any need would arise for their doing so. So she went into the parlour quite unsuspiciously, and found Miss Leaf lying on the sofa, and Miss Hilary reading aloud the letter from India. But it was laid quietly aside, as she said—

"Johanna, Elizabeth is here."

Then Johanna, rousing herself to say what must be said, but putting it as gently and kindly as she could, told Elizabeth, what mistresses often think it below their

dignity to tell servants, the plain truth—namely, that circumstances obliged herself and Miss Hilary to retrench their expenses as much as they possibly could—that they were going to live in two little rooms at Richmond, where they would board with the inmates of the house.

"And so, and so—" Miss Leaf faltered. It was very hard to say the rest with those eyes fixed upon her.

Hilary took up the word—

"And so, Elizabeth, much as it grieves us, we shall be obliged to part with you. We cannot any longer afford to keep a servant."

No answer.

"It is not even as it was once before, when we thought you might do better for yourself. We know, if it were possible, you would rather stay with us, and we would rather keep you. It is like parting with one of our own family." And Miss Hilary's voice too failed. "However, there is no help for it; we must part."

Elizabeth, recovered from her first bewil-

dered grief, was on the point of bursting out into entreaties that she might do like many another faithful servant, live without wages, put up with any hardships, rather than be sent away. But something in Miss Hilary's manner told her it would be useless; worse than useless, painful; and she would do anything rather than give her mistress pain. When, utterly unable to control it, she gave vent to one loud sob, the expression of acute suffering on Miss Hilary's countenance was such that she determined to sob no more. She felt that, for some reason or other, the thing was inevitable; that she must take up her burden, as her mistress had done, even though it were the last grief of all—leaving that beloved mistress.

"That's right, Elizabeth," said Miss Hilary softly. "All these changes are very bitter to us also, but we bear them. There is nothing lasting in this world, except doing right, and being good and faithful and helpful to one another."

She sighed. Possibly, there had been

sad tidings in the letter which she still held in her hand, clinging to it as we do to something which, however sorely it hurts us, we would not part with for the whole world. But there was no hopelessness or despair in her tone, and Elizabeth caught the influence of that true, courageous heart.

"Perhaps, you may be able to take me back again soon, ma'am," said she, looking towards Miss Leaf. "And meantime I might get a place; Mrs. Jones has told me of several," and she stopped, afraid lest it might be found out how often Mrs. Jones had urged her to "better herself," and she had indignantly refused. "Or" (a bright idea occurred), "I wonder if Miss Selina, that is, Mrs. Ascott, would take me in at Russell Square?"

Hilary looked hard at her.

"Would you really like that?"

"Yes, I should; for I should see and hear of you. Miss Hilary, if you please, I wish you would ask Mrs. Ascott to take me."

And Hilary, much surprised—for she was well acquainted with Elizabeth's sentiments towards both Mr. Ascott and the late Miss Selina—promised.

CHAPTER VII.

AND now I leave Miss Hilary for a time; leave her in, if not happiness, great peace. Peace, which after these stormy months was an actual paradise of calm to both herself and Johanna.

Their grief for Ascott had softened down. Its very hopelessness gave it resignation. There was nothing more to be done; they had done all they could, both to find him out, and to save him from the public disgrace which might blight any hope of reformation. Now the result must be left in higher hands.

Only at times fits of restless trouble would come; times when a sudden knock at the door would make Johanna shake nervously for minutes afterwards; when Hilary walked about everywhere with her mind

pre-occupied, and her eyes open to notice every chance passer-by; nay, she had sometimes secretly followed down a whole street, some figure, which, in its light jaunty step and long, fashionably-cut hair, reminded her of Ascott.

Otherwise they were not unhappy, she and her dearest sister. Poor as they were, they were together, and their poverty had no sting. They knew exactly how much they would receive monthly, and how much they ought to spend. Though obliged to calculate every penny, still their income and their expenses were alike certain; there was no anxiety about money matters, which of itself was an indescribable relief. Also there was that best blessing—peace at home. Never in all her days had Johanna known such an easy life; sitting quietly in her parlour while Hilary was engaged in the shop below; descending to dinner, where she took the head of the table, and the young people soon learnt to treat her with great respect and even affection; then waiting for the happy tea in

their own room, and the walk afterwards, in Richmond Park or along the Thames' banks towards Twickenham. Perhaps it was partly from the contrast to that weary year in London, but never in any spring had the air seemed so balmy, or the trees so green. They brought back to Hilary's face the youthful bloom that she had begun to lose; and, in some degree, her youthful brightness, which had also become slightly overclouded. Again she laughed and made her little domestic jokes, and regained her pretty way of putting things, so that everything always appeared to have a cheerful, and even a comical side.

Also—for while we are made as we are, with capacity for happiness, and especially the happiness of love, it is sure to be thus—she had a little private sunbeam in her own heart, which brightened outside things. After that sad letter from India which came on Selina's wedding day, every succeeding one grew more cheerful, more demonstrative and affectionate; though still, with that queer Scotch pride of his

that would ask for nothing till it could ask and have everything, and give everything in return, the letters were all addressed to Johanna.

"What an advantage it is to be an old woman!" Miss Leaf would sometimes say mischievously, when she received them. But more often she said nothing: waiting in peace for events to develop themselves. She did not think much about herself, and had no mean jealousy over her child; she knew that a righteous and holy love only makes all natural affections more sacred and more dear.

And Hilary! She held her head higher and prouder; and the spring trees looked greener, and the river ran brighter in the sunshine. Ah, Heaven pity us all! it is a good thing to have love in one's life; it is a good thing, if only for a time, to be actually *happy*. Not merely contented, but *happy*.

And so I will leave her, this little woman; and nobody need mourn over her because she is working too hard, or pity her because she is obliged to work; has to wear com-

mon clothes, and live in narrow rooms, and pass on her poor weary feet the grand carriages of the Richmond gentry, who are not more well-born or well-educated than she is;—yet who never take the slightest notice of her, except sometimes to peer curiously at the desk where she sits in the shop-corner, and wonder who "that young person with the rather pretty curls" can be. No matter, she is happy.

How much happiness was there in the large house at Russell square?

The Misses Leaf could not tell; their sister never gave them an opportunity of judging.

> My son 's my son till he gets him a wife,
> But my daughter 's my daughter all her life.

And so, most frequently is "my sister." But not in this case. It could not be; they never expected it would.

When, on her rare visits to town, Hilary called at Russell Square, she always found Mrs. Ascott handsomely dressed, dignified, and gracious. Not in the slightest degree uncivil or unsisterly, but gracious; perhaps

a thought too gracious. Most condescendingly anxious that she should stay to luncheon, and eat and drink the best the house afforded, but never by any chance inviting her to stay to dinner. Consequently, as Mr. Ascott was always absent in the City until dinner, Hilary did not see him for months together, and her brother-in-law was, she declared, no more to her than any other man upon 'Change, or the man in the moon, or the Great Mogul.

His wife spoke little about him. After a few faint, formal questions concerning Richmond affairs, somehow her conversation always recurred to her own: the dinners she had been at, those she was going to give; her carriages, clothes, jewellery, and so on. She was altogether a very great lady, and Hilary, as she avouched laughingly — it was, in this case, better to laugh than to grieve — felt an exceedingly small person beside her.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Ascott showed no unkindness — nay, among the various changes that matrimony had produced in

her, her temper appeared rather to have improved than otherwise; there was now seldom any trace of that touchy sharpness which used to be called "poor Selina's way." And yet Hilary never quitted the house without saying to herself, with a sigh, the old phrase, "Poor Selina."

Thus, in the inevitable consequences of things, her visits to Russell Square became fewer and fewer; she kept them up as a duty, not exacting any return, for she felt that was impossible, though still maintaining the ghostly shadow of sisterly intimacy. Nevertheless, she knew well it was but a shadow; that the only face which looked honest, glad, welcome, or that she was honestly glad to see, in her brother-in-law's house, was the under-housemaid, Elizabeth Hand.

Contrary to all expectations, Mrs. Ascott had consented to take Elizabeth into her service. With many stipulations and warnings never to presume on past relations, never even to mention Stowbury, on pain of instant dismissal—still, she did take

her, and Elizabeth stayed. At every one of Miss Hilary's visits, lying in wait in the bed-chamber, or on the staircase, or creeping up at the last minute to open the hall door, was sure to appear the familiar face, beaming all over. Little conversation passed between them — Mrs. Ascott evidently disliked it; still Elizabeth looked well and happy, and when Miss Hilary told her so, she always silently smiled.

But this story must tell the whole truth which lay beneath that fond acquiescing smile.

Elizabeth was certainly in good health, being well-fed, well-housed, and leading on the whole an easy life; happy too, when she looked at Miss Hilary. But her migration from Mrs. Jones' lodgings to this grand mansion had not been altogether the translation from purgatory to paradise that some would have supposed.

The author of this simple story having — unfortunately for it — never been in domestic service, especially in the great houses of London, does not pretend to

describe the ins and outs of their "high life below stairs," to repeat kitchen conversations, to paint the humours of the servants' hall — the butler and housekeeper getting tipsy together, the cook courting the policeman, and the footman making love successively to every housemaid and lady's-maid. Some writers have depicted all this, whether faithfully or not, they know best; but the present writer declines to attempt anything of the kind. Her business is solely with the one domestic, the country-girl who came unexpectedly into this new world of London servant-life; a world essentially its own, and a life of which the upper classes are as ignorant as they are of what goes on in Madagascar or Tahiti.

This fact was the first which struck the unsophisticated Elizabeth. She, who had been brought up in a sort of feudal relationship to her dear mistresses, was astonished to find the domestics of Russell Square banded together in a community which, in spite of their personal bickerings

and jealousies, ended in alliance offensive and defensive against the superior powers, whom they looked upon as their natural enemies. Invisible enemies, certainly; for "master" they hardly ever saw; and, excepting the lady's-maid, were mostly as ignorant of "missis." The housekeeper was the middle link between the two estates; the person with whom all business was transacted, and to whom all complaints had to be made. Beyond being sometimes talked over, generally in a quizzical, depreciatory, or condemnatory way, the heads of the establishment were no more to their domestics than the people who paid them their wages, and exacted in return certain duties, which they on their part made as light as possible, and escaped whenever they could.

If this be an exaggerated picture of a state of things perhaps in degree inevitable — and yet it should not be, for it is the source of incalculable evil, this dividing of a house against itself — if I have in any way said what is not true, I would that

some intelligent "voice from the kitchen" would rise up and tell us what is true, and whether it be possible on either side to find means of amending what so sorely needs reformation.

Elizabeth sometimes wanted Tom Cliffe to do this—to 'write a book,' which he, eager young malcontent, was always threatening to do, upon the evils of society, and especially the tyranny of the upper classes. Tom Cliffe was the only person to whom she imparted her troubles and perplexities: how different her life was from that she had been used to; how among her fellow-servants there was not one who did not seem to think and act in a manner totally opposed to everything she had learnt from Miss Hilary. How consequently she herself was teased, bullied, threatened, or at best "sent to Coventry," from morning till night.

"I'm quite alone, Tom; I am, indeed," said she, almost crying, the first Sunday night when she met him accidentally in going to church, and, in her dreary state of

mind, was exceedingly glad to see him. He consoled her, and even went to church with her, half promising to do the same next Sunday, and calling her "a good little Christian, who almost inclined him to be a Christian too."

And so, with the vague feeling that she was doing him good, and keeping him out of harm—the lad who had so much that was kindly and nice about him—Elizabeth consented, not exactly to an appointment, but she told him what were her "Sundays out," and the church she usually attended, if he liked to take the chance of her being there.

Alack! she had so few pleasures; she so seldom got even a breath of outside air; it was not thought necessary for servants. The only hour she was allowed out, was the church-going on alternate Sunday evenings. How pleasant it was to creep out then, and see Tom waiting for her under the opposite trees, dressed so smart and gentlemanlike, looking so handsome and so glad to see her —her, the poor, countrified Elizabeth, who

was quizzed incessantly by her fellow-servants for her oddness, plainness, and stupidity.

Tom did not seem to think her stupid, for he talked to her of all his doings and plannings, vague and wild as those of the young tailor in "Alton Locke," yet with a romantic energy about them that strongly interested his companion; and he read her his poetry, and addressed a few lines to herself, beginning—

Dearest and best, my long familiar friend,

which was rather a poetical exaggeration, since he had altogether forgotten her in the interval of their separation. But she never guessed this; and so they both clung to the early tie, making it out to be ten times stronger than it really was, as people do who are glad of any excuse for being fond of one another.

Tom really was getting fond of Elizabeth. She touched the higher half of his nature—the spiritual and imaginative half. That he had it, though only a working man, and

she too, though only a domestic servant, was most true: probably many more of their class have it than we are at all aware of. Therefore, these two, being special individuals, were attracted by each other; she by him, because he was so clever, and he by her, because she was so good. For he had an ideal, poor Tom Cliffe! and though it had been smothered and laid to sleep by a not too regular life, it woke up again under the kind, sincere eyes of this plain, simple-minded, honest Elizabeth Hand.

He knew she was plain, and so old-fashioned in her dress, that Tom, who was particular about such things, did not always like walking with her: but she was so interesting and true; she sympathised with him so warmly; he found her so unfailingly and unvaryingly good to him through all the little humours and pettishnesses that almost always accompany a large brain, a nervous temperament, and delicate health. Her quietness soothed him, her strength of character supported him; he at once leaned on her and ruled over her.

As to Elizabeth's feelings towards Tom, they will hardly bear analysing; probably hardly any strong emotion will, especially one that is not sudden but progressive. She admired him extremely, and yet she was half sorry for him. Some things in him she did not at all like, and tried heartily to amend. His nervous fancies, irritations, and vagaries she was exceedingly tender over: she looked up to him, and yet took care of him; this thought of him, and anxiety over him, became by degrees the habit of her life. People love in so many different ways; and perhaps that was the natural way in which a woman like Elizabeth would love, or creep into love without knowing it, which is either the safest or the saddest form which the passion can assume.

Thus things went on, till one dark, rainy Sunday night, walking round and round the inner circle of the Square, Tom expressed his feelings. At first, in somewhat high-flown and poetical phrases, then melting into the one, eternally old and eternally

new, "Do you love me?" followed by a long, long kiss, given under shelter of the umbrella, and in mortal fear of the approaching policeman; who, however, never saw them, or saw them only as "a pair of sweethearts"—too common an occurrence on his beat to excite any attention.

But to Elizabeth the whole thing was new, wonderful! a bliss so far beyond anything that had ever befallen her simple life, and so utterly unexpected therein, that when she went to her bed that night, she cried like a child over the happiness of Tom's loving her, and her exceeding unworthiness of the same.

Then difficulties arose in her mind. "No followers allowed," was one of the strict laws of the Russell Square dynasty. Like many another law of that and of much higher dynasties, it was only made to be broken; for stray sweethearts were continually climbing down area railings, or over garden walls, or hiding themselves behind kitchen doors. Nay, to such an extent was the system carried out, each servant being,

from self-interest, a safe co-conspirator, that very often when Mr. and Mrs. Ascott went out to dinner, and the old housekeeper had retired to bed, there were regular symposia held below-stairs—nice little supper-parties, where all the viands in the pantry and the wines in the cellar were freely used; where every domestic had his or her "young man" or "young woman," and the goings-on, though not actually discreditable, were of the most lively kind.

To be cognisant of these, and yet to feel that, as there was no actual wickedness going on, she was not justified in "blabbing," was a severe and perpetual trial to Elizabeth. To join them, or bring Tom among them as her "young man," was impossible.

"No, Tom," she said, when he begged hard to come in one evening—for it was raining fast, and he had a bad cough—"No, Tom, I can't let you. If other folks break the laws of the house, I won't—you must go. I can only meet you out-of-doors."

And yet to do this surreptitiously, just

as if she were ashamed of him, or as if there were something wrong in their being fond of one another, jarred upon Elizabeth's honest nature. She did not want to make a show of him, especially to her fellow-servants: she had the true woman's instinct of wishing to keep her treasures all to herself; but she had also her sex's natural yearning for sympathy in the great event of a woman's life. She would have liked to have somebody unto whom she could say, "Tom has asked me to marry him," and who would have answered cordially, "It 's all right; he is a good fellow: you are sure to be happy."

Not that she doubted this; but it would have been an additional comfort to have a mother's blessing, or a sister's, or even a friend's, upon this strange and sweet emotion which had come into her life. So long as it was thus kept secret, there seemed a certain incompleteness and unsanctity about even their happy love.

Tom did not comprehend this at all. He only laughed at her for feeling so "nesh"

(that means, tender, sensitive—but the word is almost unexplainable to other than Stowbury ears) on the subject. He liked the romance and excitement of secret courtship—men often do; rarely women, unless there is something in them not quite right, not entirely womanly.

But Tom was very considerate, and though he called it "silly," and took a little fit of crossness on the occasion, he allowed Elizabeth to write to her mother about him, and consented that on her next holiday she should go to Richmond, in order to speak to Miss Hilary on the same subject, and ask her also to write to Mrs. Hand, stating how good and clever Tom was, and how exceedingly happy was Tom's Elizabeth.

"And won't you come and fetch me, Tom?" asked she, shyly. "I am sure Miss Hilary would not object, nor Miss Leaf neither."

Tom protested he did not care two straws whether they objected or not; he was a man of twenty, in a good trade—he had

lately gone back to the printing, and being a clever workman, earned capital wages. He had a right to choose whom he liked, and marry when he pleased. If Elizabeth didn't care for him, she might leave him alone.

"Oh, Tom!" was all she answered, with a strange gentleness, that no one could have believed would ever have come into the manner of the South Sea Islander. And quitting the subject then, she afterwards persuaded him, and not for the first time, into consenting to what she thought right.

There is something rather touching in a servant's holiday. It comes so seldom. She must count on it for so long beforehand, and remember it for so long afterwards. This present writer owns to a strong sympathy with the holiday-makers on the grand gala-days of the English calendar. It is a pleasure to watch the innumerable groups of family folk, little children, and 'prentice lads,

> —Dressed in all their best,
> To walk abroad with Sally.

And the various "Sallys" and their corresponding swains can hardly feel more regret than she when it happens to be wet weather in Easter week or at Whitsuntide.

Whit-Monday, the day when Tom escaped from the printing-office, and Elizabeth got leave of absence for six hours, was as glorious a June day as well could be. As the two young people perched themselves on the top of the Richmond omnibus, and drove through Kensington, Hammersmith, Turnham Green, and over Kew Bridge—Tom pointing out all the places, and giving much curious information about them—Elizabeth thought there never was a more beautiful country, or a more lovely summer day: she was, she truly said, "as happy as a queen."

Nevertheless, when the omnibus stopped, she, with great self-denial, insisted on getting rid of Tom for a time. She thought Miss Hilary might not quite like Tom's knowing where she lived, or what her occupation was, lest he might gossip about it to Stowbury people; so she determined to pay her visit by herself, and appointed to meet him

at a certain hour on Richmond Bridge, over which bridge she watched him march sulkily, not without a natural pleasure that he should be so much vexed at losing her company for an hour or two. But she knew he would soon come to himself;—as he did, before he had been half-a-mile on the road to Hampton Court, meeting a young fellow he knew, and going with him over that grand old palace, which furnished them with a subject at their next debating society, where they both came out very strong on the question of hypocritical priests and obnoxious kings, with especial reference to Henry VIII. and Cardinal Wolsey.

Meanwhile Elizabeth went in search of the little shop—which nobody need expect to find at Richmond now—bearing the well-known name, "Janet Balquidder." Entering it, for there was no private door, she saw, in the far corner above the curtained desk, the pretty curls of her dear Miss Hilary.

Elizabeth had long known that her mistress "kept a shop," and with the notions

of gentility which are just as rife in her class as in any other, had mourned bitterly over this fact. But when she saw how fresh and well the young lady looked, how busily and cheerfully she seemed to work with her great books before her, and with what a composed grace and dignity she came forward when asked for, Elizabeth secretly confessed that not even keeping a shop had made or could make the smallest difference in Miss Hilary.

She herself was much more changed.

"Why, Elizabeth, I should hardly have known you!" was the involuntary exclamation of her late mistress.

She certainly did look very nice; not smart—for her sober taste preferred quiet colours—but excessively neat and well-dressed. In her new gown of grey "coburg," her one handsome shawl, which had been honoured several times by Miss Hilary's wearing, her white straw bonnet and white ribbons, underneath which the smooth black hair and soft eyes showed to great advantage, she appeared—not "like

a lady," a servant can seldom do that, let her dress be ever so fine—but like a thoroughly respectable, intelligent, and pleasant-faced young woman.

And her blushes came and went so fast; she was so nervous, and yet so beamingly happy, that Miss Hilary soon suspected there was more in this visit than at first appeared. Knowing that with Elizabeth's great shyness the mystery would never come out in public, she took an opportunity of asking her to help her in the bedroom, and there, with the folding doors safely shut, discovered the whole secret.

Miss Hilary was a good deal surprised at first. She had never thought of Elizabeth as likely to get married at all—and to Tom Cliffe!

"Why, isn't he a mere boy; ever so much younger than you are?"

"Three years."

"That is a pity; a great pity; women grow old so much faster than men."

"I know that," said Elizabeth, somewhat sorrowfully.

"Besides, did you not tell me he was very handsome and clever?"

"Yes; and I 'm neither the one nor the other. I have thought all that over too; many a time; indeed I have, Miss Hilary. But Tom likes me — or fancies he does. Do you think"— and the intense humility which true love always has, struck into Miss Hilary's own conscious heart a conviction of how very true this poor girl's love must be. "Do you think he is mistaken? that his liking me — I mean in that sort of way — is quite impossible?"

"No, indeed, and I never said it; never thought it," was the earnest reply. "But consider; three years younger than yourself; handsomer and cleverer than you are —"

Miss Hilary stopped; it seemed so cruel to say such things, and yet she felt bound to say them. She knew her former "bower-maiden" well enough to be convinced that if Elizabeth were not happy in marriage, she would be worse than unhappy—might grow actually bad.

"He loves you now; you are sure of that; but are you sure that he is a thoroughly stable and reliable character? Do you believe he will love you always?"

"I can't tell. Perhaps; if I deserved it," said poor Elizabeth.

And, looking at the downcast eyes, at the thoroughly womanly sweetness and tenderness which suffused the whole face, Hilary's doubts began to melt away. She thought, how sometimes men, captivated by inward rather than outward graces, have fallen in love with plain women, or women older than themselves, and actually kept to their attachment through life, with a fidelity rare as beautiful. Perhaps this young fellow, who seemed by all accounts superior to his class — having had the sense to choose that pearl in an oyster shell, Elizabeth Hand — might also have the sense to appreciate her, and go on loving her to the end of his days. Anyhow, he loved her now, and she loved him; and it was useless reasoning any more about it.

"Come, Elizabeth," cried her mistress,

cheerfully; "I have said all my say, and now I have only to give my good wishes. If Tom Cliffe deserves you, I am sure you deserve him, and I should like to tell him so."

"Should you, Miss Hilary?" and with a visible brightening up, Elizabeth betrayed Tom's whereabouts, and her little conspiracy to bring him here, and her hesitation lest it might be "intruding."

"Not at all. Tell him to come at once. I am not like my sister; we always allow 'followers.' I think a mistress stands in the relation of a parent, for the time being; and that cannot be a right or good love which is concealed from her, as if it were a thing to be ashamed of."

"I think so too. And I'm not a bit ashamed of Tom, nor he of me," said Elizabeth — so energetically, that Miss Hilary smiled.

"Very well, take him to have his tea in the kitchen, and then bring him up stairs, to speak to my sister and me."

At that interview, which of course was

rather trying, Tom acquitted himself to everybody's satisfaction. He was manly, modest, self-possessed; did not say much — his usual talkativeness being restrained by the circumstances of the case, and the great impression made upon him by Miss Hilary, who, he afterwards admitted to Elizabeth, "was a real angel, and he should write a poem upon her." But the little he did say gave the ladies a very good impression of the intelligence and even refinement of Elizabeth's sweetheart. And though they were sorry to see him look so delicate, still there was a something better than handsomeness in his handsome face, which made them not altogether surprised at Elizabeth's being so fond of him.

As she watched the young couple down Richmond street, in the soft summer twilight — Elizabeth taking Tom's arm, and Tom drawing up his stooping figure to its utmost extent, both a little ill-matched in height as they were in some other things, but walking with that air of perfect confidence and perfect contentedness in each

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"Very well, take him to have his tea in the kitchen, and then bring him up stairs, to speak to my sister and me."

At that interview, which of course was

rather trying, Tom acquitted himself to everybody's satisfaction. He was manly, modest, self-possessed; did not say much — his usual talkativeness being restrained by the circumstances of the case, and the great impression made upon him by Miss Hilary, who, he afterwards admitted to Elizabeth, "was a real angel, and he should write a poem upon her." But the little he did say gave the ladies a very good impression of the intelligence and even refinement of Elizabeth's sweetheart. And though they were sorry to see him look so delicate, still there was a something better than handsomeness in his handsome face, which made them not altogether surprised at Elizabeth's being so fond of him.

As she watched the young couple down Richmond street, in the soft summer twilight — Elizabeth taking Tom's arm, and Tom drawing up his stooping figure to its utmost extent, both a little ill-matched in height as they were in some other things, but walking with that air of perfect confidence and perfect contentedness in each

forgotten it. She seemed to take as little interest in her servants' affairs as they in hers.

Nevertheless, ignorant as the lower regions were in general of what was passing in the upper, occasionally rumours began to reach the kitchen that "Master had been a-blowing up Missis, rather!" And once, after the solemn dinner, with three footmen to wait on two people, was over, Elizabeth, passing through the hall, caught the said domestics laughing together, and saying it was "as good as a play; cat and dog was nothing to it." After which "the rows up-stairs" became a favourite joke in the servants' hall.

But still Mr. Ascott went out daily after breakfast, and came home to dinner; and Mrs. Ascott spent the morning in her private sitting-room, or "boudoir," as she called it; lunched, and drove out in her handsome carriage, with her footman behind; dressed elegantly for dinner, and presided at her own table, with an air of magnificent satisfaction in all things. She

had perfectly accommodated herself to her new position; and if under her satins and laces beat a solitary, dissatisfied, or aching heart, it was nobody's business but her own. At least, she kept up the splendid sham with a most creditable persistency.

But all shams are dangerous things. Be the surface ever so smooth and green, it will crack sometimes, and a faint wreath of smoke betray the inward volcano. Something of this sort had happened once or twice; as on the day when the men-servants were so intensely amused. Also Elizabeth, when putting in order her mistress's bedroom, which was about the hour Mr. Ascott left for the City, had several times seen Mrs. Ascott come in there suddenly, white and trembling. Once, so agitated was she that Elizabeth had brought her a glass of water; and instead of being angry or treating her with the distant dignity which she had always kept up, her mistress had said, almost in the old Stowbury tone, "Thank you, Elizabeth."

However, Elizabeth had the wisdom to

take no notice, but to slip from the room, and keep her own counsel.

At last one day the smouldering domestic earthquake broke out. There was "a precious good row," the footman suspected, at the breakfast-table; and after breakfast, Master, without waiting for the usual attendance of that functionary, with his hat and gloves, and a Hansom cab, had flung himself out at the hall-door, slamming it after him with a noise that startled the whole house. Shortly afterwards, "Missis's" bell had rung violently, and she had been found lying on the floor of her bedroom in a dead faint, her maid, a foolish little French-woman, screaming over her.

The frightened servants gathered round in a cluster, but nobody attempted to touch the poor lady, who lay rigid and helpless, hearing none of the comments that were freely made upon her, or the conjectures as to what Master had done or said, that produced this state of things. Mistress she was, and these four or five women, her servants, had lived in her house for months, but

nobody loved her; nobody knew anything about her; nobody thought of doing anything for her, till a kitchen-maid, probably out of former experience in some domestic emergency, suggested, "Fetch Elizabeth."

The advice was eagerly caught at, everybody being only too thankful to have the responsibility shifted to some other body's shoulders; so in five minutes Elizabeth had the room cleared, and her mistress laid upon the bed, with nobody near except herself and the French maid.

Mrs. Ascott opened her eyes.

"Who 's that? What are you doing to me?"

"Nothing, ma'am. It 's only me—Elizabeth."

At the familiar soothing voice, the poor woman—a poor, wretched, forlorn woman she looked, lying there, in spite of all her grandeur—turned feebly round.

"Oh, Elizabeth, I 'm so ill; take care of me." And she fainted away once more.

It was some time before she came quite to herself, and then the first thing she said

was to bid Elizabeth bolt the door, and keep everybody out.

"The doctor, ma'am ; if he comes ?"

"I 'll not see him. I don't want him. I know what it is. I—"

She pulled Elizabeth closer to her, whispered something in her ear, and then burst into a violent fit of hysterical weeping.

Amazed, shocked, Elizabeth at first did not know what to do; then she took her mistress's head on her shoulder, and quieted her by degrees almost as she would a child. The sobbing ceased, and Mrs. Ascott lay still a minute, till suddenly she clutched Elizabeth's arm.

"Mind you don't tell. *He* doesn't know, and he shall not; it would please him so much. It does not please me. Sometimes I almost think I shall hate it, because it is his child."

She spoke with a fierceness that was hardly credible either in the dignified Mrs. Peter Ascott or the languid Miss Selina. To think of Miss Selina's expecting a baby!

The idea perfectly confounded poor Elizabeth.

"I don't know very much about such matters," said she, deprecatingly, "but I'm sure, ma'am, you ought to keep yourself quiet, and I wouldn't hate the poor little baby, if I were you. It may be a very nice little thing, and turn out a great comfort to you."

Mrs. Ascott lifted her heavy eyes to the kindly, sympathetic, womanly face—thorough woman, for, as Elizabeth went on, her heart warmed with the strong instinct which comes almost of itself.

"Think, to have a tiny little creature lying here beside you; something your very own, with its pretty face looking so innocent and sweet at you, and its pretty fingers touching you." Here Elizabeth's voice quite faltered over the picture she had drawn. "Oh, ma'am, I 'm sure you would be so fond of it."

Human nature is strong. This cold, selfish woman, living her forty years without any strong emotion, marrying without love,

and reaping, not in contrition but angry bitterness, the certain punishment of such a marriage, even this woman was not proof against the glorious mystery of maternity, which should make every daughter of Eve feel the first sure hope of her first-born child to be a sort of Divine annunciation.

Mrs. Ascott lay, listening to Elizabeth. Gradually through her shut eyelids a few quiet tears began to flow.

"Do you mind me talking to you this way, ma'am?"

"No, no! Say what you like. I'm glad to have anybody to speak to. Oh, I am a very miserable woman!"

Strange that Selina Ascott should come to betray, and to Elizabeth Hand, of all people, that she was a "miserable woman." But circumstances bring about unforeseen confidences; and the confidence once given is not easily recalled. Apparently the lady did not wish to recall it. In the solitude of her splendid house; in her total want of all female companionship—for she refused to have her sisters sent for—"*he* would

only insult them, and I'll not have my family insulted"—poor Selina clung to her old servant as the only comfort she had.

During the dreary months that followed, when, during the long, close summer days, the sick lady scarcely stirred from her bedroom, and, fretful, peevish, made the very most of what to women in general are such patiently borne and sacred sufferings, Elizabeth was her constant attendant. She humoured all her whims, endured all her ill-tempers, cheered her in her low spirits, and was, in fact, her mistress's sole companion and friend.

This position no one disputed with her. It is not every woman who has, as Miss Leaf used to say of Elizabeth, "a genius for nursing;" and very few patients make nursing a labour of love. The whole household were considerably relieved by her taking a responsibility for which she was so well fitted, and so little envied. Even Mr. Ascott, who, when his approaching honours could no longer be concealed from him, became for the nonce a most

attentive husband, and succumbed dutifully to every fancy his wife entertained, openly expressed his satisfaction in Elizabeth, and gave her one or two bright golden guineas in earnest of his gratitude.

How far she herself appreciated her new and important position; whether her duties were done from duty, or pity, or that determined self-devotedness which some women are always ready to carry out towards any helpless thing that needs them, I cannot say, for she never told. Not even to Miss Hilary, who at last was permitted to come and pay a formal visit; nor to Tom Cliffe, whom she now saw very rarely, for her mistress, with characteristic selfishness, would hardly let her out of her sight for half an hour.

Tom at first was exceedingly savage at this: by degrees he got more reconciled, and met his sweetheart now and then for a few minutes at the area-gate, or wrote her long poetical letters, which he confided to some of her fellow-servants, who thereby got acquainted with their secret. But it

mattered little, as Elizabeth had faithfully promised that, when her mistress's trial was over, and everything smooth and happy, she would marry Tom at once. So she took the jokes below stairs with great composure; feeling, indeed, too proud and content to perplex herself much about anything.

Nevertheless, her life was not easy, for Mrs. Ascott was very difficult to manage. She resisted angrily all the personal sacrifices entailed by impending motherhood, and its terrors and forebodings used to come over her—poor weak woman that she was!—in a way that required all Elizabeth's reasonings to counteract, and all her self-control to hide the presentiment of evil, not unnatural under the circumstances.

Yet sometimes poor Mrs. Ascott would take fits of pathetic happiness; when she busied herself eagerly over the preparations for the new-comer; would make Elizabeth take out, over and over again, the little clothes, and examine them with childish delight. Sometimes she would gossip for

hours over the blessing that was sent to her so late in life—half-regretting that it had come so late; that she should be almost an old woman before her little son or daughter was grown up.

"Still, I may live to see it, you know: to have a pretty girl to take on my arm into a ball-room, or a big fellow to send to college: the Leafs always went to college in old times. He shall be Henry Leaf Ascott, that I am determined on; and if it 's a girl, perhaps I may call her Johanna. My sister would like it; wouldn't she?"

For more and more, in the strange softening of her nature, did Selina go back to the former ties.

"I am not older than my mother was when Hilary was born. She died, but that was because of trouble. Women do not often die in childbirth even at forty; and in twenty years more I shall only be sixty—not such a very old woman. Besides, mothers never are old: at least not to their children. Don't you think so, Elizabeth?"

And Elizabeth answered as she best

could. She too, out of sympathy or instinct, was becoming wondrous wise.

But I am aware all this will be thought very uninteresting, except by women and mothers. Let me hasten on.

By degrees, as Mrs. Ascott's hour approached, a curious tranquillity and even gentleness came over her. Her fretful dislike of seeing any face about her but Elizabeth's became less. She even endured her husband's company for an hour of an evening; and at last humbled her pride enough to beg him to invite her sisters to Russell Square from Saturday to Monday, the only time when Hilary could be spared.

"For we don't know what may happen," said she to him, rather seriously.

And though he answered, "Oh, nonsense!" and desired her to get such ridiculous fancies out of her head, still he consented, and himself wrote to Miss Leaf, giving the formal invitation.

The three sisters spent a happy time together, and Hilary made some highly appreciated family jokes about the handsome

Christmas box that Selina was going to be so kind as to give them, and the small probability that she would have much enjoyment of the Christmas dinner to which Mr. Ascott, in the superabundance of his good feeling, had invited his sisters-in-law. The baby, blessed innocent! seemed to have softened down all things—as babies often do.

Altogether, it was with great cheerfulness, affectionateness, and hope, that they took leave of Selina: she, with unwonted consideration, insisting that the carriage should convey them all the way to Richmond.

"And," she said, "perhaps some of these days my son, if he is a son, may have the pleasure of escorting his aunts home. I shall certainly call him 'Henry Leaf,' and bring him up to be in every way a credit to our family."

When the ladies were away, and Mrs. Ascott had retired to bed, it was still only nine o'clock, and a bright moonlight night. Elizabeth thought she could steal down

stairs and try to get a breath of fresh air round the Square. Her long confinement made her almost sick sometimes for a sight of the outer world, a sight of—let me tell the entire truth—her own faithful Tom.

She had not seen him now for fourteen days, and though his letters were very nice and exceedingly clever, still she craved for a look at his face, a grasp of his hand, perhaps even a kiss, long and close and tender, such as he would sometimes insist upon giving her, in spite of all policemen. His love for her, demonstrative as was his nature, had become to this still, quiet girl inexpressibly sweet, far sweeter than she knew.

It was a clear winter night, and the moon went climbing over the fleecy white clouds in a way that made beauty even in Russell Square. Elizabeth looked up at the sky, and thought how Tom would have enjoyed it, and wished he were beside her, and was so glad to think he would soon be beside her always, with all his humours and weaknesses, all his little crossnesses and

complainings; she could put up with all, and be happy through all, if only she had him with her and loving her.

His love for her, though fitful and fanciful, was yet so warm and real, that it had become a necessity of her life. As, he always told her—especially after he had had one of his little quarrels with her—hers was to him.

"Poor Tom, I wonder how he gets on without me! Well, it won't be for long."

And she wished she could have let him know she was out here, that they might have a chat for just ten minutes.

Unconsciously she walked towards their usual trysting-place, a large overhanging plane-tree on the Keppel Street corner of the Square.

Surely, surely, that could not be Tom! Quite impossible, for he was not alone. Two people, a young man and a young woman, stood at the tryst, absorbed in conversation: evidently sweethearts, for he had one arm round her, and he kissed her, unresisted, several times.

Elizabeth gazed, fascinated, almost doubting the evidence of her own senses. For the young man's figure was so excessively like Tom's. At length, with the sort of feeling that makes one go steadily up to a shadow by the roadside, some ugly spectre that we feel sure, if we stare it out, will prove to be a mere imagination, she walked deliberately up to and past these "sweethearts."

They did not see her; they were far too much occupied with one another: but she saw them, and saw at once that it was Tom, Tom's own self, and with him her fellow-servant, Esther.

People may write volumes on jealousy, and volumes will still remain to be written. It is, next to remorse for guilt, the sharpest, sorest, most maddening torment that human nature can endure.

We may sit and gaze from the boxes at our Othellos and Biancas; we may laugh at the silly heart-burnings between Cousin Kate and Cousin Lucy in the ball-room, or the squabbles of Mary and Sally in the

kitchen over the gardener's lad; but there the thing remains. A man cannot make love to two women, a woman cannot coquet with two men, without causing in degree that horrible agony, cruel as death, which is at the root of half the tragedies, and the cause of half the crimes of this world.

The complaint comes in different forms; sometimes it is a case of slow poisoning, or of ordeal by red-hot irons, which, though not fatal, undermines the whole character, and burns ineffaceable scars into the soul. And people take it in various ways; some fiercely, stung by a sense of wounded self-love; others haughtily;—

> Pride 's a safe robe, I 'll wear it: but no rags.

Others, again, humble, self-distrustful natures, whose only pride came through love, have nothing left them except rags. In a moment, all their thin robes of happiness are torn off; they stand shivering, naked, and helpless before the blasts of the bitter world.

This was Elizabeth's case. After the

first instant of stunned bewilderment and despair, she took it all quite naturally, as if it were a thing which she ought all along to have known was sure to happen, and which was no more than she expected and deserved.

She passed the couple, still unobserved by them; and then walked round the other side of the Square, deliberately home.

I am not going to make a tragic heroine of this poor servant-girl. Perhaps, people may say, there is nothing tragic about the incident. Merely a plain, quiet, old-fashioned woman, who is so foolish as to like a handsome young swain, and to believe in him, and to be surprised when he deserts her for a pretty girl of eighteen. All quite after the way things go on in the world, especially in the servant-world; and the best she can do is to get over it, or take another sweetheart as quickly as possible. A very common story after all, and more of a farce than a tragedy.

But there are some farces, which, if you look underneath the surface, have a good many of the elements of tragedy.

I shall neither paint Elizabeth tearing her own hair, or Esther's; or going raging about the Square by moonlight, in an insane fit of jealousy. She was not given to "fits" under any circumstances, or about anything. All she felt went deep down into her heart, rooted itself, and either blossomed or cankered there.

On this night she, as I said, walked round the Square to her home; then quietly went upstairs to her garret, locked the door, and sat down upon her bed.

She might have sat there for an hour or more, her bonnet and shawl still on, without stirring, without crying, altogether cold and hard like a stone, when she fancied she heard her mistress's bell ring, and mechanically rose up and went downstairs to listen. Nothing was wanted, so she returned to her room and crept to bed in the dark.

When soon afterwards Esther likewise came up to bed, Elizabeth pretended to be asleep. Only once, taking a stealthy glance at the pretty girl who stood combing her hair at the looking-glass, she was conscious

of a sick sense of repulsion, a pain like a knife running through her, at sight of the red young lips which Tom had just been kissing, of the light figure which he had clasped, as he used to clasp her. But she never spoke, not one word.

Half-an-hour after she was roused by the nurse coming to her bed-side. Mrs. Ascott was very ill, and was calling for Elizabeth. Soon the whole establishment was in confusion, and in the sharp struggle between birth and death Elizabeth had no time to think of anything but her mistress.

Contrary to every expectation, all ended speedily and happily; and before he went off to the City next day, the master of the house, who in the midst of his anxiety and felicity had managed to secure a good night's sleep and a good breakfast, had the pleasure of sending off a special messenger to the *Times* office with the notification, "The Lady of Peter Ascott, Esq., of a son and heir."

CHAPTER IX.

A FORTNIGHT'S time rather increased than diminished the excitement incident on the event at Russell Square.

Never was there such a wonderful baby, and never was there such a fuss made over it. Unprejudiced persons might have called it an ugly, weakly little thing; indeed, at first there were such apprehensions of its dying, that it had been baptised in a great hurry, "Henry Leaf Ascott," according to the mother's desire, which in her critical position nobody dared to thwart. Even at the end of fourteen days the "son and heir" was still a puling, sickly, yellow-faced baby. But to the mother it was everything.

From the moment she heard its first cry, Mrs. Ascott's whole nature seemed to un-

dergo a change. Her very eyes—those cold blue eyes of Miss Selina's—took a depth and tenderness whenever she turned to look at the little bundle that lay beside her.

She never wearied of touching the tiny hands and feet, and wondering at them, and showing — to every one of the household who was favoured with a sight of it — "my baby," as if it had been a miracle of the universe. She was so unutterably happy and proud.

Elizabeth, too, seemed not a little proud of the baby. To her arms it had first been committed; she had stood by at its first washing and dressing, and had scarcely left it or her mistress since. Nurse, a very grand personage, had been a little jealous of her at first, but soon grew condescending, and made great use of her in the sick-room, alleging that such an exceedingly sensible young person, so quiet and steady, was almost as good as a middle-aged married woman. Indeed, she once asked Elizabeth if she was a widow, since she looked as if she had seen trouble;—and was very

much surprised to hear she was single and only twenty-three years old.

Nobody else took any notice of her. Even Miss Hilary was so engrossed by her excitement and delight over the baby, that she only observed, "Elizabeth, you look rather worn-out; this has been a trying time for you." And Elizabeth had just answered "Yes"—no more.

During the fortnight she had seen nothing of Tom. He had written her a short note or two, and the cook told her he had been to the kitchen-door several times asking for her, but being answered that she was with her mistress upstairs, had gone away.

"In the sulks, most like, though he didn't look it. He's a pleasant-spoken young man, and I'm sure I wish you luck with him," said Cookie, who, like all the other servants, was now exceedingly civil to Elizabeth.

Her star had risen; she was considered in the household a most fortunate woman. It was shortly understood that nurse—

majestic nurse—had spoken so highly of her, that at the month's end the baby was to be given entirely into her charge, with, of course, an almost fabulous amount of wages.

"Unless," said Mrs. Ascott, when this proposition was made, suddenly recurring to a fact which seemed hitherto to have quite slipped from her mind, "unless you are still anxious to get married, and think you would be happier married. In that case I won't hinder you. But it would be such a comfort to me to keep you a little longer."

"Thank you, ma'am," answered Elizabeth, softly, and busied herself with walking baby up and down the room, hushing it on her shoulder. If in the dim light tears fell on its puny face, God help her, poor Elizabeth!

Mrs. Ascott made such an excellent recovery, that in three weeks' time nobody was the least uneasy about her, and Mr. Ascott arranged to start on a business journey to Edinburgh; promising, however,

to be back in three days for the Christmas dinner, which was to be a grand celebration. Miss Leaf and Miss Hilary were to appear thereat in their wedding-dresses; and Mrs. Ascott herself took the most vital interest in Johanna's having a new cap for the occasion. Nay, she insisted upon ordering it from her own milliner, and having it made of the most beautiful lace—the "sweetest" old lady's cap that could possibly be invented.

Evidently this wonderful baby had opened all hearts, and drawn every natural tie closer. Selina, lying on the sofa, in her graceful white wrapper and her neat close cap, looked so young, so pretty, and, above all, so exceedingly gentle and motherly, that her sisters' hearts were full to overflowing. They acknowledged that happiness, like misery, was often brought about in a fashion totally unforeseen and incredible. Who would have thought, for instance, on that wretched night when Mr. Ascott came to Hilary at Kensington, or on that dreary, heartless wedding-day, that

they should ever have been sitting in Selina's room, so merry and comfortable, admiring the baby, and on the friendliest terms with baby's papa?

"Papa" is a magical word, and let married people have fallen ever so wide asunder, the thought, "my child's mother," "my baby's father," must in some degree bridge the gulf between them. When Peter Ascott was seen stooping, awkwardly enough, over his son's cradle, poking his dumpy fingers into each tiny cheek in a half-alarmed, half-investigating manner, as if he wondered how it had all come about, but on the whole, was rather pleased than otherwise, the good angel of the household might have stood by and smiled, trusting that the ghastly skeleton therein might in time crumble away into harmless dust, under the sacred touch of infant fingers.

The husband and wife took a kindly, even affectionate leave of one another. Mrs. Ascott called him "Peter," and begged him to take care of himself, and wrap up well that cold night. And when he was gone,

and her sisters also, she lay on her sofa with her eyes open, thinking. What sort of thoughts they were, whether repentant or hopeful, solemn or tender, whether they might have passed away and been forgotten, or how far they might have influenced her life to come, none knew, and none ever did know.

When there came a knock to the door, and a message for Elizabeth, Mrs. Ascott suddenly overheard it and turned round.

"Who is wanting you? Tom Cliffe? Isn't that the young man you are to be married to? Go down to him at once. And stay, Elizabeth, as it's such a bitter night, take him for half-an-hour into the housekeeper's room. Send her upstairs, and tell her I wished it, though I don't allow 'followers.'"

"Thank you, ma'am," said Elizabeth once more, and obeyed. She must speak to Tom some time, it might as well be done to-night as not. Without pausing to think, she went down with dull, heavy steps to the housekeeper's room.

Tom stood there alone. He looked so

exactly his own old self; he came forward to meet her so completely in his old familiar way, that for the instant she thought she must be under some dreadful delusion; that the moonlight night in the Square must have been all a dream;—Esther still the silly little Esther whom Tom had often heard of and laughed at; and Tom, her own Tom, who loved nobody but herself.

"Elizabeth; what an age it is since I've had a sight of you!"

But though the manner was warm as ever—

> In his tone
> A something smote her, as if Duty tried
> To mock the voice of Love, now long since flown.

and quiet as she stood, Elizabeth shivered in his arms.

"Why, what's the matter? Aren't you glad to see me? Give me another kiss, my girl, do!"

He took it; and she crept away from him and sat down.

"Tom, I've something to say to you, and I'd better say it at once."

"To be sure. 'T isn't any bad news from home, is it? Or"—looking uneasily at her —"I haven't vexed you, have I?"

"*Vexed* me," she repeated, thinking what a small, foolish word it was to express what had happened, and what she had been suffering. "No, Tom, not vexed me exactly. But I want to ask you a question. Who was it that you stood talking with, under our tree in the Square, between nine and ten o'clock, this night three weeks ago?"

Though there was no anger in the voice, it was so serious and deliberate that it made Tom start.

"Three weeks ago; how can I possibly tell?"

"Yes, you can; for it was a fine moonlight night, and you stood there a long time."

"Under the tree, talking to somebody? What nonsense! Perhaps it wasn't me at all."

"It was, for I saw you."

"The devil you did!" muttered Tom.

"Don't be angry, only tell me the plain truth. The young woman that was with you was our Esther here, wasn't she?"

For the moment Tom looked altogether confounded. Then he tried to recover himself, and said crossly, "Well, and if it was, where's the harm? Can't a man be civil to a pretty girl without being called over the coals in this way?"

Elizabeth made no answer, at least not immediately. At last she said, in a very gentle, subdued voice—

"Tom, are you fond of Esther? You would not kiss her if you were not fond of her. Do you like her as—as you used to like me?"

And she looked right up into his eyes. Hers had no reproach in them, only a piteous entreaty, the last clinging to a hope which she knew to be false.

"Like Esther? of course I do. She's a nice girl, and we are very good friends."

"Tom, a man can't be 'friends,' in that sort of way, with a pretty girl of eighteen, when he is going to be married to somebody

else. At least, in my mind, he ought not."

Tom laughed in a confused manner. "I say, you're jealous, and you'd better get over it."

Was she jealous? was it all fancy, folly? Did Tom stand there, true as steel, without a feeling in his heart that she did not share, without a hope in which she was not united, holding her, and preferring her, with that individuality and unity of love which true love ever gives and exacts, as it has a right to exact?

Not that poor Elizabeth reasoned in this way, but she felt the thing by instinct without reasoning.

"Tom," she said, "tell me outright, just as if I was somebody else, and had never belonged to you at all, do you love Esther Martin?"

Truthful people enforce truth. Tom might be fickle, but he was not deceitful; he could not look into Elizabeth's eyes and tell her a deliberate lie; somehow, he dared not.

"Well, then — since you will have it out of me — I think I do."

So Elizabeth's "ship went down." It might have been a very frail vessel, that nobody in their right senses would have trusted any treasure with; still she did, and it was all she had, and it went down to the bottom like a stone.

It is astonishing how soon the sea closes over this sort of wreck; and how quietly people take—when they must take, and there is no more disbelieving it—the truth which they would have given their lives to prove was an impossible lie.

For some minutes, Tom stood facing the fire, and Elizabeth sat on her chair opposite, without speaking. Then she took off her brooch, the only love-token he had given her, and put it into his hand.

"What 's this for?" asked he, suddenly.

"You know. You 'd better give it to Esther. It 's Esther, not me, you must marry now."

And the thought of Esther, giddy, flirting, useless Esther, as Tom's wife, was almost

more than she could bear. The sting of it put even into her crushed humility a certain honest self-assertion.

"I'm not going to blame you, Tom; but I think I'm as good as she. I'm not pretty, I know, nor lively, nor young, at least I'm old for my age: but I was worth something. You should not have served me so."

Tom said, the usual excuse, that he "couldn't help it." And suddenly turning round, he begged her to forgive him, and not forsake him.

She forsake Tom! Elizabeth almost smiled.

"I do forgive you; I'm not a bit angry with you. If I ever was, I have got over it."

"That's right. You 're a dear soul. Do you think I don't like you, Elizabeth?"

"Oh yes," she said sadly, "I daresay you do, a little, in spite of Esther Martin. But that 's not my way of liking, and I couldn't stand it."

"What couldn't you stand?"

"Your kissing me to-day, and another girl to-morrow: your telling me I was everything to you one week, and saying exactly the same thing to another girl the next. It would be hard enough to bear if we were only friends, but as sweethearts, as husband and wife, it would be impossible. No, Tom, I tell you the truth, I could not stand it."

She spoke strongly, unhesitatingly, and for an instant there flowed out of her soft eyes that wild, fierce spark, latent even in these quiet, humble natures, which is dangerous to meddle with.

Tom did not attempt it. He felt all was over. Whether he had lost or gained, whether he was glad or sorry, he hardly knew.

"I'm not going to take this back, anyhow," he said, "fiddling" with the brooch; and then going up to her, he attempted, with trembling hands, to refasten it in her collar.

The familar action, his contrite look, were too much. People who have once

loved one another, though the love is dead (for love *can* die), are not able to bury it all at once, or if they do, its pale ghost will still come knocking at the door of their hearts, "Let me in, let me in."

Elizabeth ought, I know, in proper feminine dignity, to have bid Tom farewell without a glance or a touch. But she did not. When he had fastened her brooch, she looked up in his familiar face, a sorrowful, wistful, lingering look, and then clung about his neck:

"Oh, Tom, Tom, I was so fond of you!"

And Tom mingled his tears with hers, and kissed her many times, and even felt his old affection returning, making him half oblivious of Esther; but mercifully — for love rebuilt upon lost faith is like a house founded upon sands—the door opened, and Esther herself came in.

Laughing, smirking, pretty Esther, who, thoughtless as she was, had yet the sense to draw back when she saw them.

"Come here, Esther!" Elizabeth called imperatively; and she came.

"Esther, I've given up Tom; you may take him if he wants you. Make him a good wife, and I'll forgive you. If not"—

She could not say another word. She shut the door upon them, and crept upstairs, conscious only of one thought—if she only could get away from them, and never see either of their faces any more!

And in this fate was kind to her, though in that awful way in which fate—say rather Providence—often works; cutting, with one sharp blow, some knot that our poor, feeble, mortal fingers have been long labouring at in vain; or making that which seemed impossible to do, the most natural, easy, and only thing to be done.

How strangely often in human life "one woe doth tread upon the other's heel!" How continually, while one of those small private tragedies of which I have spoken is being enacted within, the actors are called upon to meet some other tragedy from without, so that external energy counteracts inward emotion, and holy sympathy with another's sufferings stifles all personal

pain. That truth about sorrows coming "in battalions" may have a divine meaning in it—may be one of those mysterious laws which guide the universe—laws that we can only trace in fragments, and guess at the rest, believing in deep humility that one day we shall "know even as we are known."

Therefore I ask no pity for Elizabeth, because ere she had time to collect herself, and realise in her poor confused mind that she had indeed said good-bye to Tom, given him up and parted from him for ever, she was summoned to her mistress's room, there to hold a colloquy outside the door with the seriously perplexed nurse.

One of those sudden changes had come which sometimes, after all seems safe, strike terror into a rejoicing household, and end by carrying away, remorseless, the young wife from her scarcely tasted bliss, the mother of many children from her close circle of happy duties and yearning loves.

Mrs. Ascott was ill. Either she had taken cold or been too much excited, or in

the over-confidence of her recovery some slight neglect had occurred — some trifle which nobody thinks of till afterwards, and which yet proves the fatal cause, the "little pin" that

Bores through the castle wall

of mortal hope, and King Death enters in all his awful state.

Nobody knew it or dreaded it; for though Mrs. Ascott was certainly ill, she was not at first very ill; and there being no telegraphs in those days, no one thought of sending for either her husband or her sisters. But that very hour, when Elizabeth went up to her mistress, and saw the flush on her cheek, and the restless expression of her eye, King Death had secretly crept in at the door of the mansion in Russell Square.

The patient was carefully removed back into her bed. She said little, except once, looking up uneasily—

"I don't feel quite myself, Elizabeth."

And when her servant soothed her in the

long-familiar way, telling her she would be better in the morning, she smiled contentedly, and turned to go to sleep.

Nevertheless Elizabeth did not go to her bed, but sat behind the curtain, motionless, for an hour or more.

Towards the middle of the night, when her baby was brought to her, and the child instinctively refused its natural food, and began screaming violently, Mrs. Ascott's troubled look returned.

"What is the matter? What are you doing, nurse? I won't be parted from my baby—I won't, I say!"

And when, to soothe her, the little thing was again put into her arms, and again turned from her, a frightened expression came into the mother's face.

"Am I going to be ill?—is baby?—"

She stopped; and as nurse determinately carried it away, she attempted no resistance, only followed it across the room with eager eyes. It was the last glimmer of reason there. From that time her mind began to wander, and before morning she was slightly delirious.

Still nobody apprehended danger. Nobody really knew anything about the matter, except nurse, and she, with a selfish fear of being blamed for carelessness, resisted sending for the doctor till his usual hour of calling. In that large house, as in many other large houses, everybody's business was nobody's business, and a member of the family, even the mistress, might easily be sick or dying in some room therein, while all things else went on just as usual, and no one was any the wiser.

About noon, even Elizabeth's ignorance was roused up to the conviction that something was very wrong with Mrs. Ascott, and that nurse's skill could not counteract it. On her own responsibility she sent, or rather she went to fetch the doctor. He came; and his fiat threw the whole household into consternation.

Now they knew that the poor lady whose happiness had touched the very stoniest hearts in the establishment, hovered upon the brink of the grave. Now all the women-servants, down to the little kitchen-

maid with her dirty apron at her eyes, crept upstairs, one after the other, to the door of what had been such a silent, mysterious room, and listened, unhindered, to the ravings that issued thence. "Poor missis," and the "poor little baby," were spoken of softly at the kitchen dinner-table, and confidentially sympathised over with inquiring tradespeople at the area-gate. A sense of awe and suspense stole over the whole house, gathering thicker hour by hour of that dark December day.

When her mistress was first pronounced "in danger," Elizabeth, aware that there was no one to act but herself, had taken a brief opportunity to slip from the room and write two letters, one to her master in Edinburgh, and the other to Miss Hilary. The first she gave to the footman to post, the second she charged him to send by special messenger to Richmond. But he, being lazily inclined, or else thinking that, as the order was only given by Elizabeth, it was of comparatively little moment, posted them both. So, vainly did the poor

girl watch and wait; neither Miss Leaf nor Miss Hilary came.

By night Mrs. Ascott's delirium began to subside, but her strength was ebbing fast. Two physicians—three—stood by the unconscious woman, and pronounced that all hope was gone, if, indeed, the case had not been hopeless from the beginning.

"Where is her husband? Has she no relations, no mother or sisters?" asked the fashionable physician, Sir—— ——, touched by the sight of this poor lady's dying alone, with only a nurse and a servant about her. "If she has, they ought to be sent for immediately."

Elizabeth ran downstairs, and, rousing the old butler from his bed, prevailed on him to start immediately in the carriage, to bring back Miss Leaf and Miss Hilary. It would be midnight before he reached Richmond, still it must be done.

"I'll do it, my girl," said he, kindly; "and I'll tell them as gently as I can. Never fear."

When Elizabeth returned to her mistress's

room, the doctors were all gone, and nurse, standing at the foot of Mrs. Ascott's bed, was watching her with the serious look which even a hireling or a stranger wears, in the presence of that sight which, however familiar, never grows less awful—a fellow-creature slowly passing from this life into the life unknown.

Elizabeth crept up to the other side. The change, indescribable yet unmistakable, which comes over a human face when the warrant for its dissolution has gone forth, struck her at once.

Never yet had Elizabeth seen death. Her father's she did not remember, and among her few friends and connections none other had occurred. At twenty-three years of age she was still ignorant of that solemn experience which every woman must go through some time, often many times, during her life. For it is to women that all look in their extreme hour. Very few men, even the tenderest-hearted, are able to watch by the last struggle and close the eyes of the dying.

For the moment, as she glanced round the darkened room, and then at the still figure on the bed, Elizabeth's courage failed. Strong love might have overcome this fear — the natural recoil of youth and life from coming into contact with death and mortality; but love was not exactly the bond between her and Mrs. Ascott. It was rather duty, pity, the tenderness that would have sprung up in her heart towards anybody she had watched and tended so long.

"If she should die, die in the night, before Miss Hilary comes!" thought the poor girl, and glanced once more round the shadowy room, where she was now left quite alone. For nurse, thinking with true worldly wisdom of the preservation of the "son and heir," which was decidedly the most important question now, had stolen away, and was busy in the next room, seeing various young women whom the doctors had sent, one of whom was to supply to the infant the place of the poor mother whom it would never know.

There was nobody left but herself to watch this dying mother, so Elizabeth took her lot upon her, smothered down her fears, and sat by the bedside, waiting for the least expression of returning reason in the sunken face, which was very quiet now.

Consciousness did return at last, as the doctors had said it would. Mrs. Ascott opened her eyes; they wandered from side to side, and then she said, feebly—

"Elizabeth, where's my baby?"

What Elizabeth answered, she never could remember; perhaps nothing, or her agitation betrayed her, for Mrs. Ascott said again,

"Elizabeth, am I going to — to leave my baby?"

Some people might have considered it best to reply with a lie—the frightened, cowardly lie that is so often told at death-beds to the soul passing direct to its God. But this girl could not and dared not.

Leaning over her mistress, she whispered, as softly as she could, choking down the tears that might have disturbed the peace

which, mercifully, seemed to have come with this last hour—

"Yes, you are going very soon — to God. He will watch over baby, and give him back to you again some day, quite safe."

"Will He?"

The tone was submissive, half-inquiring; like that of a child learning something it had never learned before — as Selina was now learning. Perhaps, even those three short weeks of motherhood had power so to raise her whole nature, that she had now gained the composure with which even the weakest soul can sometimes meet death, and had grown not unworthy of the dignity of a Christian's dying.

Suddenly she shivered. "I am afraid; I never thought of—this. Will nobody come and speak to me?"

Oh, how Elizabeth longed for Miss Hilary, for anybody, who would have known what to say to the dying woman; who perhaps, as her look and words implied, till this hour had never thought of death.

Once, it crossed the servant's mind to send for some clergyman; but she knew none, and was aware that Mrs. Ascott did not either. She had no superstitious feeling that any clergyman would do; just to give a sort of spiritual extreme unction to the departing soul. Her own religious faith was of such an intensely personal, silent kind, that she did not believe in any good to be derived from a strange gentleman coming and praying by the bedside of a stranger, repeating set sayings with a set countenance, and going away again. And yet with that instinct which comes to almost every human soul fast departing, Mrs. Ascott's white lips whispered, "Pray."

Elizabeth had no words, except those which Miss Leaf used to say night after night in the little parlour at Stowbury. She knelt down, and in a trembling voice repeated in her mistress's ear—"*Our Father which art in heaven*"—to the end.

After it Mrs. Ascott lay very quiet. At length she said, "Please—bring—my—

baby." It had been from the first, and was to the last, "*my*" baby.

The small face was laid close to hers that she might kiss it.

"He looks well; he does not miss me much yet, poor little fellow!" And then the strong natural agony came upon her, conquering even the weakness of her dying hour. "Oh, it 's hard, hard! Will nobody teach my baby to remember me?"

Lifting herself up on her elbow, she caught hold of nurse.

"Tell Mr. Ascott that Elizabeth is to take care of baby. Promise, Elizabeth. Johanna is old — Hilary may be married— *you* will take care of my baby?"

"I will—as long as I live," said Elizabeth Hand.

She took the child in her arms, and for almost another hour stood beside the bed thus, until nurse whispered, "Carry it away, its mother doesn't know it now."

But she did; for she feebly moved her fingers as if in search of something. Baby was still asleep, but Elizabeth contrived,

by kneeling down close to the bed, to put the tiny hand under those cold fingers; they closed immediately upon it, and remained so till the last.

When Miss Leaf and Miss Hilary came in, Elizabeth was still kneeling there, trying softly to take the little hand away; for the baby had wakened, and began its piteous wail. But it did not disturb the mother now.

"Poor Selina" was no more. Nothing of her was left to her child except the name of a mother. It may have been better so.

CHAPTER X.

"IN MEMORY OF
SELINA,
THE BELOVED WIFE OF PETER ASCOTT, ESQ.
OF RUSSELL SQUARE, LONDON,
AND DAUGHTER OF
THE LATE HENRY LEAF, ESQ.
OF THIS TOWN.
DIED DECEMBER 24, 1839,
AGED 41 YEARS."

SUCH was the inscription which now, for six months, had met the eyes of the inhabitants of Stowbury, on a large dazzlingly-white marble monument, the first that was placed in the churchyard of the New Church.

What motive induced Mr. Ascott to inter his wife here—whether it was a natural wish to lay her, and some day lie beside her, in their native earth, or the less creditable desire of showing how rich he had

become, and of joining his once humble name, even on a tombstone, with one of the oldest names in the annals of Stowbury—nobody could find out. Probably nobody cared.

The Misses Leaf were content that he should do as he pleased in the matter: he had shown strong but not exaggerated grief at his loss; if any remorse mingled therewith, Selina's sisters happily did not know it. Nobody ever did know the full history of things except Elizabeth, and she kept it to herself. So the family skeleton was buried quietly in Mrs. Ascott's grave.

Peter Ascott showed, in his coarse fashion, much sympathy and consideration for his wife's sisters. He had them staying in his house till a week after the funeral was over, and provided them with the deepest and handsomest mourning. He even, in a formal way, took counsel with them as to the carrying out of Mrs. Ascott's wishes, and the retaining of Elizabeth in charge of the son and heir, which was accordingly settled. And then they went back to their

old life at Richmond, and the widower returned to his solitary bachelor ways. He looked as usual; went to and from the City as usual; and his brief married life seemed to have passed away from him like a dream.

Not altogether a dream. Gradually he began to wake up to the consciousness of an occasional child's cry in the house; that large, silent, dreary house, where he was once more the sole master. Sometimes, when he came in from church of Sundays, he would mount another flight of stairs, walk into the nursery at the top of the house, and stare with distant curiosity at the little creature in Elizabeth's arms, pronounce it a "fine child, and did her great credit," and walk down again. He never seemed to consider it as *his* child, this poor old bachelor of so many years' standing; he had outgrown apparently all sense of the affections or the duties of a father. Whether they ever would come into him; whether, after babyhood was passed, he would begin to take an interest

in the little creature who throve and blossomed into beauty—which, as if watched by guardian angels, dead mothers' children seem often to do—was a source of earnest speculation to Elizabeth.

In the meantime, he treated both her and the baby with extreme consideration, allowed her to do just as she liked, and gave her indefinite sums of money to expend upon the nursery.

When summer came, and the doctor ordered change of air, Mr. Ascott consented to her suggestion of taking a lodging for herself and baby near baby's aunts at Richmond; only desiring that the lodging should be as handsome as could be secured, and that, every other Sunday, she should bring up his son to spend the day at Russell Square.

And so, during the long summer months, the motherless child, in its deep mourning—which looks so pathetic on a very young baby—might be seen carried about in Elizabeth's arms everywhere. When, after the first six months, the wet-nurse left—in

fact, two or three wet-nurses successively were abolished—she took little Henry solely under her own charge. She had comparatively small experience, but she had common sense, and the strong motherly instinct which comes by nature to some women. Besides, her whole soul was wrapped up in this little child.

From the hour when, even with her mistress dying before her eyes, Elizabeth had felt a strange thrill of comfort in the new duty which had come into her blank life, she took to this duty as women only can whose life *has* become a blank. She received the child as a blessing sent direct from God; by unconscious hands—for Mrs. Ascott knew nothing of what happened; something that would heal her wounded heart, and make her forget Tom.

And so it did. Women and mothers well know how engrossing is the care of an infant; how each minute of the day is filled up with something to be done or thought of; so that "fretting" about extraneous things becomes quite impossible. How

gradually the fresh life growing up and expanding puts the worn-out or blighted life into the background, and all the hopes and fancies cling around the small, beautiful present, the ever-developing, ever-marvellous mystery of a young child's existence! Why it should be so, we can only guess; but that it is so, many a wretched wife, many a widowed mother, many a broken-hearted, forlorn aunt, has thankfully proved.

Elizabeth proved it likewise. She did not exactly lose all memory of her trouble, but it seemed lighter; it was swallowed up in this second passion of adopted motherhood. And so she sank, quietly and at once, into the condition of a middle-aged woman, whose life's story—and her sort of women have but one—was a mere episode, told and ended.

For Esther had left, and been married to Tom Cliffe, within a few weeks of Mrs. Ascott's funeral. Of course, the household knew everything; but nobody condoled with Elizabeth. There was a certain stand-off-ishness about her which made them hold

their tongues. They treated her with much respect, as her new position demanded. She took this, as she took everything, with the grave quietness which was her fashion from her youth up; assumed her place as a confidential upper servant; dressed well, but soberly, like a woman of forty, and was called "Mrs." Hand.

The only trace her "disappointment" left upon her was a slightly bitter way of speaking about men in general, and a dislike to any chatter about love-affairs and matrimony. Her own story she was never known to refer to, in the most distant way, except once.

Miss Hilary—who, of course, had heard all, but delicately kept silence—one night, when little Henry was not well, remained in the lodgings on Richmond Hill, and slept in the nursery, Elizabeth making up for herself a bed on the floor close beside baby and cradle. In the dead of night the two women, mistress and maid, by some chance, said a few things to one another which never might have been said in the daylight, and

which, by tacit consent, were never afterwards referred to by either, any more than if they had been spoken in a dream.

Elizabeth told briefly, though not without emotion, all that had happened between herself and Tom, and how he was married to Esther Martin. And then both women went back, in a moralising way, to the days when they had both been girls at Stowbury; and how different life was from what they then thought and looked forward to—Miss Hilary and her "bower-maiden."

"Yes!" answered the former, with a sigh, "things are indeed not as people fancy when they are young. We dream, and dream, and think we see very far into the future, which nobody sees but God. I often wonder how my life will end."

Elizabeth said, after a pause, "I always felt sure you would be married, Miss Hilary. There was one person—Is he alive still? Is he ever coming home?"

"I don't know."

"I am sure he was very fond of you. And he looked like a good man."

"He was the best man I ever knew."

This was all Miss Hilary said, and she said it softly and mournfully. She might never have said it at all; but it dropt from her unawares in the deep feeling of the moment, when her heart was tender over Elizabeth's own sad, simply-told story. Also, because of a sudden and great darkness which had come over her own.

Literally, she did not now know whether Robert Lyon were alive or dead. Two months ago his letters had suddenly ceased, without any explanation: his last being exactly the same as the others—as frank, as warmly affectionate, as cheerful and brave.

One solution to this was his possible coming home. But she did not, after careful reasoning on the subject, believe that likely. She knew exactly his business relations with his employers; that there was a fixed time for his return to England, which nothing except the very strongest necessity could alter. Even in the chance of his health breaking, so as to incapacitate

him for work, he should, he always said, have to go to the hills, rather than take the voyage home prematurely. And in that case, he certainly would have informed his friends of his movements. There was nothing erratic, or careless, or eccentric about Robert Lyon; he was a practical, business-like Scotchman—far too cautious and too regular in all his habits to be guilty of those accidental negligences by which wanderers abroad sometimes cause such cruel anxieties to friends at home.

For the same reason, the other terrible possibility—his death—was not likely to have happened without their hearing of it. Hilary felt sure, with the strong confidence of love, that he would have taken every means to leave her some last word—some farewell token—which would reach her after he was gone, and comfort her with the assurance of what, living, he had never plainly told. Sometimes, when a wild terror of his death seized her, this settled conviction drove it back again. He must be living, or she would have heard.

There was another interpretation of the silence, which many would have considered the most probable of all—he might be married. Not deliberately, but suddenly; drawn into it by some of those impelling trains of circumstance which are the cause of so many marriages—especially with men; or impelled by one of those violent passions which occasionally seize on an exceedingly good man, fascinating him against his conscience, reason, and will, until he wakes up to find himself fettered and ruined for life. Such things do happen—strangely, pitifully often. The like might have happened to Robert Lyon.

Hilary did not actually believe it; but still her common sense told her that it was possible. She was not an inexperienced girl now; she looked on the world with the eyes of a woman of thirty; and though, thank Heaven! the romance had never gone out of her—the faith, and trust, and tender love—still it had sobered down a little. She knew it was quite within the bounds of possibility that a young man, separated

from her for seven years, thrown into all kinds of circumstances and among all sorts of people, should have changed very much in himself, and, consequently, towards her; that, without absolute faithlessness, he might suddenly see some other woman he liked better, and marry at once. Or, if he came back unmarried — she had taught herself to look this probability also steadily in the face — he might find the reality of her — Hilary Leaf — different from his remembrance of her; and so, without actual falseness to the old true love, might not love her any more.

These fears made her resolutely oppose Johanna's wish to write to the house of business at Liverpool, and ask what had become of Mr. Lyon. It seemed like seeking after him — trying to hold him by the slender chain which he had never attempted to make any stronger, and which, already, he might have broken, or desired to break.

She could not do it. Something forbade her; that something in the inmost depths of a woman's nature which makes her feel

her own value, and exact that she shall be sought; that, if her love be worth having, it is worth seeking; that, however dear a man may be to her, she refuses to drop into his mouth like an over-ripe peach from a garden wall. In her sharpest agony of anxiety concerning him, Hilary felt that she could not, on her part, take any step that seemed to compel love—or even friendship—from Robert Lyon. It was not pride—she could hardly be called a proud woman; it was an innate sense of the dignity of that love which, as a free gift, is precious as "much fine gold," yet becomes the merest dross—utterly and insultingly poor—when paid as a debt of honour, or offered as a benevolent largess.

And so, though oftentimes her heart felt breaking, Hilary laboured on; sat the long day patiently at her desk; interested herself in the young people over whom she ruled; became Miss Balquidder's right hand in all sorts of schemes which that good woman was for ever carrying out for the benefit of her fellow-creatures; and at leisure times

occupied herself with Johanna, or with Elizabeth and the baby—trying to think it was a very beautiful and happy world, with love still in it, and a God of love ruling over it—only, only—

Women are very humble in their cruellest pride. Many a day she felt as if she could have crawled a hundred miles in the dust—like some Catholic pilgrim—just to get one sight of Robert Lyon.

Autumn came—lovely and lingering late. It was November, and yet the air felt mild as May, and the sunshine had that peculiar genial brightness which autumnal sunshine alone possesses;—even as, perhaps, late happiness has in it a holy calm and sweetness which no youthful ecstacy can ever boast.

The day happened to be Hilary's birthday. She had taken a holiday, which she, Johanna, Elizabeth, and the baby had spent in Richmond Park, watching the rabbits darting about under the brown fern, and the deer grazing contentedly hard by. They had sat a long time under one of the oak-

trees with which the Park abounds, listening for the sudden drop, drop of an occasional acorn among the fallen leaves; or making merry with the child, as a healthy, innocent, playful child always can make good women merry.

Still, Master Henry was not a remarkable specimen of infanthood, and had never occupied more than his proper nepotal corner in Hilary's heart. She left him chiefly to Elizabeth, and to his aunt Johanna, in whom the grandmotherly character had blossomed out in full perfection. And when these two became engrossed in his infant majesty, Hilary sat a little apart, unconsciously folding her hands and fixing her eyes on vacancy; becoming fearfully alive to the sharp truth, that of all griefs a strong love unreturned or unfulfilled is the grief that most blights a woman's life. Say, rather, any human life; but it is worst to a woman, because she must necessarily endure passively. So enduring, it is very difficult to recognise the good hand of God therein. Why should He ordain longings,

neither selfish nor unholy, which yet are never granted; tenderness which expends itself in vain; sacrifices which are wholly unneeded; and sufferings which seem quite thrown away? That is, if we dared allege of anything in the moral or in the material world, where so much loveliness, so much love, appear continually wasted, that it is really "thrown away." We never know through what divine mysteries of compensation the Great Father of the universe may be carrying out His sublime plan; and those three words, "God is love," ought to contain, to every doubting soul, the solution of all things.

As Hilary rose from under the tree, there was a shadow on her sweet face, a listless weariness in her movements, which caught Johanna's attention. Johanna had been very good to her child. When, do what she would, Hilary could not keep down fits of occasional dulness or impatience, it was touching to see how this woman of over sixty years slipped from her due pedestal of honour and dignity, to be patient with her

younger sister's unspoken bitterness and incommunicable care.

She now, seeing how restless Hilary was, rose when she rose, put her arm in hers, and accompanied her, speaking or silent, with quick steps or slow, as she chose, across the beautiful park, than which, perhaps, all England cannot furnish a scene more thoroughly sylvan, thoroughly English. They rested on that high ground near the gate of Pembroke Lodge, where the valley of the Thames lies spread out like a map, stretching miles and miles away in luxuriant greenery.

"How beautiful! I wonder what a foreigner would think of this view? Or any one who had been long abroad? How inexpressibly sweet and home-like it would seem to him!"

Hilary turned sharply away, and Johanna saw at once what her words had unwittingly implied. She felt so sorry, so vexed with herself; but it was best to leave the matter alone. So they made their way homeward, speaking of some-

thing else; and then that happened which Johanna had been almost daily expecting would happen, though she dared not communicate her hopes to Hilary, lest they should prove fallacious.

The two figures, both in deep mourning, might have attracted anyone's attention; they caught that of a gentleman who was walking quickly and looking about him as if in search of something. He passed them at a little distance, then repassed, then turned, holding out both his hands.

"Miss Leaf; I was sure it was you."

Only the voice; everything else about him was so changed that Hilary herself would certainly have gone past him in the street, that brown, foreign-looking, middle-aged man, nor recognised him as Robert Lyon. But for all that it was himself; it was Robert Lyon.

Nobody screamed, nobody fainted. People seldom do that in real life, even when a friend turns up suddenly from the other end of the world. They only hold out a warm hand, and look silently in one

another's faces, and try to believe that all is real, as these did.

Robert Lyon shook hands with both ladies, one after the other, Hilary last, then placed himself between them.

"Miss Leaf, will you take my arm?"

The tone, the manner, were so exactly like himself, that in a moment all these intervening years seemed crushed into an atom of time. Hilary felt certain, morally and absolutely certain, that, in spite of all outward change, he was the same Robert Lyon who had bade them all good-bye that Sunday night in the parlour at Stowbury. The same, even in his love for herself, though he had simply drawn her little hand under his arm, and had never spoken a single word.

Hilary Leaf, down, secretly, on your heart's lowest knees, and thank God! Repent of all your bitternesses, doubts, and pains; be joyful, be joyful! But, oh, remember to be so humble withal.

She was. As she walked silently along by Robert Lyon's side, she pulled down her

veil to hide the sweetest, most contrite, most childlike tears. What did she deserve, more than her neighbours, that she should be so very, very happy? And when, a good distance across the park, she saw the dark, solitary figure of Elizabeth carrying baby, she quietly guided her companions into a different path, so as to avoid meeting, lest the sight of her happiness might in any way hurt poor Elizabeth.

"I only landed last night at Southampton," Mr. Lyon explained to Miss Leaf, after the fashion people have, at such meetings, of falling upon the most practical and uninteresting details. "I came by the Overland Mail. It was a sudden journey. I had scarcely more than a few hours' notice. The cause of it was some very unpleasant defalcations in our firm."

Under any other circumstances, Hilary might have smiled; maybe she did smile, and tease him many a time afterwards, because the first thing he could find to talk about, after seven years' absence, was "defalcations in our firm." But now she listened

gravely, and presently took her part in the unimportant conversation which always occurs after a meeting such as this.

"Were you going home, Miss Leaf? They told me at your house you were expected to dinner. May I come with you? for I have only a few hours to stay. To-night I must go on to Liverpool."

"But we shall be sure soon to see you again?"

"I hope so. And I trust, Miss Leaf, that I do not intrude to-day."

He said this with his Scotch shyness, or pride, or whatever it was; so like his old self, that it made somebody smile! But somebody loved it. Somebody lifted up to his face eyes of silent welcome; sweet, soft, brown eyes, where never, since he knew them, had he seen one cloud of anger darken, one shadow of unkindness rise.

"This is indeed something to come home to," he said in a low voice, and not over lucidly. Ay, it was. Then he once more took refuge in the common-places of life.

"I am by no means disinterested in the

matter of dinner, Miss Leaf; for I have no doubt of finding good English roast beef and plum-pudding on your sister's birthday. Happy returns of the day, Miss Hilary."

She was so touched by his remembering this, that, to hide it, she put on a spice of her old mischievousness, and asked him if he were aware how old she was?

"Yes: you are thirty; I have known you these fifteen years."

"It is a long time," said Johanna, thoughtfully.

Johanna would not have been human had she not been a little thoughtful and silent on the way home, and had she not many times, out of the corners of her eyes, sharply investigated Mr. Robert Lyon.

He was much altered; there was no doubt of that. Seven years of Indian life would change anybody; take the youthfulness out of anybody. It was so with Robert Lyon. When coming into the parlour, he removed his hat, many a white thread was visible in his hair, and besides the spare,

dried-up look which is always noticeable in people who have lived long in hot climates, there was an "old" expression in his face, indicating many a worldly battle fought and won, but not without leaving scars behind.

Even Hilary, as she sat opposite to him at table, could not but feel that he was no longer a young man, either in appearance or reality.

We ourselves grow old, or older, without knowing it, but when we suddenly come upon the same fact in another, it startles us. Hilary had scarcely recognised how far she herself had left her girlish days behind, till she saw Robert Lyon.

"You think me very much changed?" said he, guessing, by his curiously swift intuition of old, what she was thinking of.

"Yes, a good deal changed," she answered truthfully; at which he was silent.

He could not read — perhaps no man's heart could — all the emotion that swelled in hers as she looked at him, the love of her youth, no longer young. How the

ghostly likeness of the former face gleamed out under the hard, worn lines of the face that now was touching her with ineffable tenderness. Also, with solemn content came a sense of the entire indestructibleness of that love which through all decay or alteration traces the ideal image still, clings to it, and cherishes it with a tenacity that laughs to scorn the grim dread of "growing old."

In his premature, and not specially comely middle age, in his grey hairs, in the painful, anxious, half-melancholy expression which occasionally flitted across his features, as if life had gone hard with him, Robert Lyon was a thousand times dearer to her than when the world was all before them both, in the early days at Stowbury.

There is a great deal of sentimental nonsense talked about people having been "young together." Not necessarily is this a bond. Many a tie formed in youth dwindles away and breaks off naturally in maturer years. Characters alter, circumstances divide. No one will dare to allege

that there may not be loves and friendships formed in middle life as dear, as close, as firm as any of those of youth; perhaps, with some temperaments, infinitely more so. But when the two go together, when the calm election of maturity confirms the early instinct, and the lives have run parallel, as it were, for many years, there can be no bond like that of those who say, as these two did, "We were young together."

He said so when, after dinner, he came and stood by the window where Hilary was sitting sewing. Johanna had just gone out of the room; whether intentionally or not this history cannot vouch. Let us give her the benefit of the doubt; she was a generous woman.

During the three hours that Mr. Lyon had been with her, Hilary's first agitation had subsided. The exceeding sense of rest that she had always felt beside him—sure index of the sort of love there was between them; that besides loving they were suited for one another, were meant to guide and help and bless one another—returned as

strong as ever. That deep affection, which should underlie all love, revived and clung to him with a childlike confidence, strengthening at every word he said, every familiar look and way.

He was by no means so composed as she was, especially now when, coming up to her side and watching her hands moving for a minute or so, he asked her to tell him, a little more explicitly, of what had happened to her since they parted.

"Things are rather different with you from what I supposed;" and he glanced with a troubled air round the neat but very humbly furnished parlour. "And about the shop?"

"I thought Johanna told you."

"Yes; but her letters have seemed so few, so short—not that I could expect more. Still—now, if you will trust me—tell me all."

Hilary turned to him, her friend for fifteen years. He was that, if he was nothing more. And he had been very true; he deserved to be trusted. She told him,

in brief, the full history of the last year or two, and then added:

"But, after all, it is hardly worth the telling, because, you see, we are very comfortable now. Poor Ascott, we suppose, must be in Australia. I earn enough to keep Johanna and myself, and Miss Balquidder is a good friend to us. We have repaid her, and owe nobody anything. Still, we have suffered a great deal. Two years ago; oh! it was a dreadful time."

She was hardly aware of it, but her candid tell-tale face betrayed more even than her words. It cut Robert Lyon to the heart.

"You suffered, and I never knew it."

"I never meant you to know."

"Why not?" He walked the room in great excitement, "I ought to have been told; it was cruel not to tell me. Suppose you had sunk under it; suppose you had died, or been driven to do what many a woman does for the sake of mere bread and a home — what your poor sister did — married. But I beg your pardon."

For Hilary had started up with her face all aglow.

"No," she cried; "no poverty would have sunk me as low as that. I might have starved, but I should never have married."

Robert Lyon looked at her, evidently uncomprehending; then said humbly, though rather formally—

"I beg your pardon once more. I had no right to allude to anything of the kind."

Hilary replied not. It seemed as if now, close together, they were further apart than when the Indian seas rolled between them.

Mr. Lyon's brown cheek turned paler and paler; he pressed his lips hard together; they moved once or twice, but still he did not utter a word. At last, with a sort of desperate courage, and in a tone that Hilary had never heard from him in her life before, he said:—

"Yes, I believe I have a right, the right that every man has when his whole happiness depends upon it, to ask you one question. You know everything concerning me; you

always have known; I meant that you should—I have taken the utmost care that you should. There is not a bit of my life that has not been as open to you as if—as if—." He broke off suddenly—"But I know nothing whatever concerning you."

"What do you wish to know?" she faltered.

"Seven years is a long time. Are you free? I mean, are you engaged to be married?"

"No."

"Thank God!"

He dropped his head down between his hands and did not speak for a long time.

And then, with difficulty, for it was always hard to him to speak out, he told her, at least he somehow made her understand, how he had loved her. No light fancy of sentimental youth, captivated by every fresh face it sees, putting upon each one the colouring of its own imagination, and adoring not what is, but what itself creates: no sudden, selfish, sensuous passion, caring only to attain its object, irrespective

of reason, right, or conscience; but the strong, deep love of a just man, deliberately choosing one woman as the best woman out of all the world, and setting himself resolutely to win her. Battling for her sake with all hard fortune: keeping, for her sake, his heart pure from all the temptations of the world: never losing sight of her: watching over her so far as he could, consistently with the sense of honour (or masculine pride, which was it? but Hilary forgave it anyhow) which made him resolutely compel himself to silence: holding her perfectly free, while he held himself bound. Bound by a faithfulness perfect as that of the knights of old, asking nothing, and yet giving all.

Such was his love; this brave, plain-spoken, single-hearted Scotsman. Would that there were more such men, and more such love, in the world!

Few women could have resisted it, certainly not Hilary, especially with a little secret of her own lying perdu at the bottom of her heart; that "sleeping angel" whence

half her strength and courage had come the noble, faithful, generous love of a good woman for a good man. But this secret Robert Lyon had evidently never guessed, or deemed himself wholly unworthy of such a possession.

He took her hand at last, and held it firmly.

"And now that you know all, do you think in time—I 'll not hurry you—but in time, do you think I could make you love me?"

She looked up in his face with her honest eyes. Smiling as they were, there was pathos in them; the sadness left by those long years of hidden suffering, now for ever ended.

"I have loved you all my life," said Hilary.

CHAPTER XI.

Let us linger a little over this chapter of happy love; so sweet, so rare a thing. Ay, most rare: though hundreds continually meet, love, or fancy they do, engage themselves, and marry; and hundreds more go through the same proceeding, with the slight difference of the love omitted. But the real love, steady and true: tried in the balance and not found wanting: tested by time, silence, separation; by good and ill-fortune; by the natural and inevitable change which years make in every character,—this is the rarest thing to be found on earth, and the most precious.

I do not say that all love is worthless which is not exactly this sort of love. There have been people who have succumbed instantly and permanently to some

mysterious attraction, higher than all reasoning; the same which made Hilary "take an interest" in Robert Lyon's face at church, and made him, he afterwards confessed, the very first time he gave Ascott a lesson in the parlour at Stowbury, say to himself, "If I did marry, I think I should like such a wife as that brown-eyed bit lassie of fifteen." And there have been other people, who choosing their partners from accidental circumstances, or from mean worldly motives, have found Providence kinder to them than they deserved, and settled down into happy, affectionate husbands and wives.

But none of these loves can possibly have the sweetness, the completeness of such a love as that between Hilary Leaf and Robert Lyon.

There was nothing very romantic about it. From the moment when Johanna, entering the parlour, found them standing hand-in-hand at the fireside, and Hilary came forward and kissed her, and after a

slight hesitation, Robert did the same, the affair proceeded in most mill-pond fashion :

> Unruffled by those cataracts and breaks,
> That humour interposed too often makes.

There were no lovers' quarrels; Robert Lyon had chosen that best blessing next to a good woman, a sweet-tempered woman; and there was no reason why they should quarrel more as lovers than they had done as friends. And, let it be said to the eternal honour of both, now, no more than in their friendship days, was there any of that hungry engrossment of each other's society, which is only another form of selfishness, and by which lovers so often make their own happy courting-time a season of never-to-be-forgotten bitterness to everybody connected with them.

Johanna suffered a little: all people do when the new rights clash with the old ones; but she rarely betrayed it. She was exceedingly good: she saw her child happy, and she loved Robert Lyon dearly. He was very mindful of her, very tender; and as

Hilary still persisted in doing her daily duty in the shop, he spent more of his time with the elder sister than he did with the younger, and sometimes declared solemnly to Hilary that if she did not treat him well he intended to make an offer to Johanna!

Oh, the innumerable little jokes of those happy days! Oh, the long, quiet walks by the river-side, through the park, across Ham Common—anywhere—it did not matter—the whole world looked lovely to them, even on the dullest winter-day! Oh, the endless talks; the delicious open-hearted confidences as to great things and small; the renewed mingling of two lives, which, though divided, had never been really apart, for neither had anything to conceal; neither had ever loved any but the other.

Robert Lyon was, as I have said, a good deal changed, outwardly and inwardly. He had mixed much in Indian society, and taken an excellent position therein; and this had given him not only a more polished manner, but an air of decision and command, as of one accustomed to be obeyed. There could not be

the slightest doubt, as Johanna once laughingly told him, that he would always be "master in his own house."

But he was very gentle with his "little woman," as he called her. He would sit for hours at the "ingle-neuk"—how he did luxuriate in the English fires!—with Hilary on a footstool beside him, her arm resting on his knee, or her hand fast clasped in his. And sometimes, when Johanna went out of the room, he would stoop and gather her close to his heart. But I shall tell no tales; the world has no business with these sort of things.

Hilary was very shy of parading her happiness: she disliked any demonstrations thereof, even before Johanna. And when Miss Balquidder, who had, of course, been told of the engagement, came down one day expressly to see her "fortunate fellow-countryman," as she termed him, this Machiavellian little woman actually persuaded her lover to have an important engagement in London! She could not bear him to be "looked at."

"Ah, well! I will see him some other time," said Miss Balquidder. "But I will miss you terribly, my dear. However, it's an ill wind that blows nobody good, and I have another young lady quite ready to step into your shoes. When shall you be married?"

"I don't know—hush; we'll talk of this another time," said Hilary, glancing at Johanna.

Miss Balquidder took the hint and was silent.

That important question of her marriage was indeed beginning to weigh heavily on Hilary's mind. She was fully aware of what Mr. Lyon wished, and, indeed, expected; that when, the business of the firm being settled, in six months hence he returned to India, he should not return alone. When he said this, she had never dared to answer, hardly even to think. She let the peaceful present float on, day by day, without recognising such a thing as the future.

But this could not be always. It came to an end one January afternoon, when he had returned from a second absence in

Liverpool. They were walking up Richmond Hill. The sun had set frostily and red over the silver curve of the Thames, and Venus, large and bright, was shining like a great eye in the western sky. Hilary long remembered exactly how everything looked, even to the very tree they stood under when Robert Lyon asked her to fix definitely the day that she would marry him.

"Would she consent—there seemed no special reason to the contrary—that it should be immediately? Or would she like to remain with Johanna as she was, till just before they sailed? He wished to be as considerate as possible to Johanna—still"—

And something in his manner impressed Hilary more than ever before with the conviction of all she was to him; likewise, all he was to her. More, much more than even a few short weeks since. Then, intense as it was, the love had a dream-like unreality; now it was close, home-like, familiar. Instinctively she clung to his arm; she had become so used to being Robert's darling now. She shivered as she thought of the

wide seas rolling between them; of the time when she should look for him at the daily meal and daily fireside, and find him no more She gathered up all her strength before she could bring out the few words:

"Robert, I want to talk to you about Johanna."

"I guess what it is," said he, smiling; "you would like her to go out to India with us. Certainly, if she chooses. I hope you did not suppose I should object?"

"No; but it is not that. She could not go; she would not live six months in a hot climate; the doctor tells me so."

"You have consulted him?"

"Yes, last week; confidentially, without her knowing it. But I thought it right. wanted to make quite sure before—before— Oh, Robert"—

The grief of her tone caused him to suspect what was coming. He started.

"You don't mean that? Oh, no, you cannot! My little woman—my own little woman—she could not be so unkind."

Hilary turned sick at heart. The dim

landscape, the bright sky, seemed to mingle and dance before her, and Venus to stare at her with a piercing, threatening, baleful lustre.

"Robert, let me sit down on the bench, and sit you beside me. It is too dark for people to notice us, and we shall not be very cold."

"No, my darling;" and he slipped his plaid round her shoulders, and his arm with it.

She looked up pitifully. "Don't be vexed with me, Robert, dear; I have thought it all over; weighed it on every side; nights and nights I have lain awake, pondering what was right for me to do. And it always comes to the same thing."

"What?"

"It's the old story," she answered, with a feeble smile. "'I canna leave my minnie.' There is nobody in the world to take care of Johanna but me, not even Elizabeth, who is engrossed in little Henry. If I left her, I am sure it would kill her. And she cannot come with me. Dear!" (the only fond name she ever called him) "for these

three years—you say it need only be three years—you will have to go back to India alone!"

Robert Lyon was a very good man; but he was only a man, not an angel; and though he made comparatively little show of it, he was a man very deeply in love. With that jealous tenacity over his treasure, hardly blameable, since the love is worth little which does not wish to have its object all to itself, he had, I am afraid, contemplated, not without pleasure, the carrying off of Hilary to his Indian home; and it had cost him something to propose that Johanna should go too. He was very fond of Johanna; still—

If I tell what followed, will it for ever lower Robert Lyon in the estimation of all readers? He said coldly, "As you please, Hilary;" rose up, and never spoke another word till they reached home.

It was the first dull tea-table they had ever known; the first time Hilary had ever looked at that dear face, and seen an expression there which made her look away again. He did not sulk; he was too gen-

tlemanly for that; he even exerted himself to make the meal pass pleasantly as usual; but he was evidently deeply wounded, nay, more, displeased. The strong, stern man's nature within him had rebelled; the sweetness had gone out of his face, and something had come into it which the very best of men have sometimes: alas for the woman who cannot understand and put up with it!

I am not going to preach the doctrine of tyrants and slaves; but when two walk together, they *must* be agreed, or if by any chance they are not agreed, one *must* yield. It may not always be the weaker, or in weakness may lie the chiefest strength; but it must be one or other of the two, who has to be the first to give way; and, save in very exceptional cases, it is, and it ought to be, the woman. God's law, and nature's, which is also God's, ordains this; instinct teaches it; Christianity enforces it.

Will it inflict a death-blow upon any admiration she may have excited, this brave little Hilary, who fought through the world by herself: who did not shrink from tra-

versing London streets alone, at seemly and unseemly hours; from going into sponging-houses and debtors' prisons; from earning her own livelihood, even in a shop; — if I confess that, Robert Lyon being angry with her, justly or unjustly, and she, looking upon him as her future husband, her 'lord and master,' if you will, whom she would one day promise, and intended, literally and fully, to 'obey'—she thought it her duty, not only her pleasure but her *duty*, to be the first to make reconciliation between them? Ay, at every sacrifice, except that of principle.

And I am afraid, in spite of all that "strong-minded" women may aver to the contrary, that all good women will have to do this to all men who stand in any close relation towards them, whether fathers, husbands, brothers, or lovers—if they wish to preserve peace, and love, and holy domestic influence; and that so it must be —ay, and ought to be, to the end of time.

Miss Leaf might have discovered that something was amiss; but she was too

wise to take any notice, and being more than usually feeble that day, immediately after tea she went to lie down. When Hilary followed her, arranged her pillows, and covered her up, Johanna drew her child's face close to her, and whispered,

"That will do, love. Don't stay with me. I would not keep you from Robert on any account."

Hilary all but broke down; and yet the words made her stronger, firmer; set more clearly before her the solemn duty which young folks in love are so apt to forget, that there can be no blessing on the new tie—if for anything short of inevitable necessity they let go one link of the old.

Yet, Robert— It was such a new and dreadful feeling to be standing outside the door, and shrink from going in to him; to see him rise up formally, saying, "perhaps he had better leave;" and have to answer with equal formality, "Not unless you are obliged;" and for him then, with a shallow pretence of being at ease, to take up a book and offer to read aloud to her while she

worked. He—who used always to set his face strongly against all sewing of evenings —because it deprived him temporarily of the sweet eyes and the little soft hand. Oh, it was hard, hard

Nevertheless, she sat still and tried to listen ; but the words went in at one ear, and out at the other—she retained nothing. Very soon her throat began to swell, and she could not see her needle and thread. Yet still he went on reading. It was only when, by some blessed chance, turning to reach a paper-cutter, he caught sight of her face, that he closed the book and looked discomposed; not softened, only discomposed.

Who shall be first to speak ? Who shall catch the passing angel's wing ? One minute, and it may have passed over.

I am not apologising for Hilary the least in the world. I do not know even if she stopped to consider whether it was her place or Robert's to make the first advance. Indeed, I fear she did not consider it at all, but just acted upon impulse, because it was so cruel,

so heart-breaking, to be at variance with him. But if she had considered it, I doubt not she would have done from duty exactly what she did by instinct—have crept up to him as he sat at the fireside, and laid her little hand on his.

"Robert, what makes you so angry with me still?"

"Not angry; I have no right to be."

"Yes, you would have, if I had really done wrong. Have I?"

"You must judge for yourself. For me—I thought you loved me better than I find you do, and I made a slight mistake; that is all."

Ay, he had made a mistake; but it was not that one. It was the other mistake which men continually make about women; they cannot understand that love is not worth having, that it is not love at all, but merely a selfish carrying out of selfish desires, if it blinds us to any other duty, or blunts in us any other sacred tenderness. They cannot see how she who is false in one relation may be false in another; and that,

true as human nature's truth, ay, and often fulfilling itself, is Brabantio's ominous warning to Othello—

> Look to her, Moor! have a good eye to see;
> She has deceived her father, and may thee.

Perhaps, as soon as he had said the bitter word, Mr. Lyon was sorry; anyhow, the soft answer which followed it thrilled through every nerve of the strong-willed man—a man not easily made angry, but when he was, very hard to move.

"Robert, will you listen to me for two minutes?"

"For as long as you like, only you must not expect me to agree with you. You cannot suppose I shall say it is right for you to forsake me."

"I forsake you? oh, Robert!"

Words are not always the wisest arguments. His "little woman" crept closer, and laid her head on his breast; he clasped her convulsively.

"Oh, Hilary! how could you wound me so?"

And, in lieu of the discussion, a long silence brooded over the fireside; the silence of exceeding love.

"Now, Robert, may I talk to you?"

"Yes. Preach away, my little conscience!"

"It shall not be preaching, and it is not altogether for conscience," said she, smiling. "You would not like me to tell you I did not *love* Johanna?"

"Certainly not. I love her very much myself, only I prefer you, as is natural. Apparently you do *not* prefer me, which may be also natural."

"Robert!"

There are times when a laugh is better than a reproach; and something else, which need not be more particularly explained, is safer than either. It is possible Hilary tried the experiment, and then resumed her "say."

"Now, Robert, put yourself in my place, and try to think for me. I have been Johanna's child for thirty years; she is entirely dependent upon me. Her health is feeble;

every year of her life is at the best doubtful. If she lost me, I think she would never live out the next three years. You would not like that ?"

"No."

"In all divided duties like this, somebody must suffer; the question is, who can suffer best. She is old and frail, we are young; she is alone, we are two; she never had any happiness in her life, except, perhaps, me — and we, oh, how happy we are! I think, Robert, it would be better for us to suffer than poor Johanna."

"You little Jesuit," he said; but the higher nature of the man was roused; he was no longer angry.

"It is only for a short time, remember; only three years."

"And how can I do without you for three years ?"

"Yes, Robert, you can." And she put her arms round his neck, and looked at him, eye to eye. "You know I am your very own, a piece of yourself, as it were; that when I let you go it is like tearing myself from

myself; yet I can bear it, and I will bear it, rather than do, or let you do, in the smallest degree, a thing which is not right."

Robert Lyon was not a man of many words; but he had the rare faculty of seeing a case clearly, without reference to himself, and of putting it clearly also, when necessary.

"It seems to me, Hilary, that this is hardly a question of abstract right or wrong, or a good deal might be argued on my side of the subject. It is more a case of personal conscience. The two are not always identical, though they look so at first; but they both come to the same result."

"And that is"—

"If my little woman thinks it right to act as she does, I also think it right to let her. And let this be the law of our married life, if we ever are married," and he sighed; "that when we differ, each should respect the other's conscience, and do right, in the truest sense, by allowing the other to do the same."

"Oh, Robert! how good you are!"

So these two, an hour after, met Johanna with cheerful faces; and she never knew how much both had sacrificed for her sake. Once only, when she was for a few minutes absent from the parlour, did Robert Lyon renew the subject, to suggest a medium course.

But this Hilary resolutely refused to listen to. Not that she doubted him—she doubted herself. She knew quite well, by the pang that darted through her like a shaft of ice, as she felt his warm arm round her, and thought of the time when she would feel it no more, that after she had been Robert Lyon's happy wife for three months, to let him go to India without her, would be simply and utterly impossible.

Fast fled the months; they dwindled into weeks, and then into days. I shall not enlarge upon this time. Now, when the ends of the world are drawn together, and every family has one or more relatives abroad, a grief like Hilary's has become so common that nearly everyone can, in degree, understand it. How bitter such partings

are, how much they take out of the brief span of mortal life, and therefore, how far they are justifiable, for anything short of absolute necessity, heaven knows.

In this case it was an absolute necessity. Robert Lyon's position in "our firm," with which he identified himself with the natural pride of a man who has diligently worked his way up to fortune, was such that he could not, without sacrificing his future prospects, and likewise what he felt to be a point of honour, refuse to go back to Bombay, until such time as his senior partner's son, the young fellow whom he had "coached" in Hindostanee, and nursed through a fever years ago—could conveniently take his place abroad.

"Of course," he said, explaining this to Hilary and her sister, "accidental circumstances might occur to cause my return home before the three were out, but the act must be none of mine; whatever happens I must do my duty."

"Yes, you must," answered Hilary, with a gleam lighting up her eyes. She loved

so in him this one great principle of his life—the backbone of it, as it were—duty before all things.

Johanna asked no questions. Once she had inquired, with a tremulous, hardly concealed alarm, whether Robert wished to take Hilary back with him, and Hilary had kissed her, smilingly, saying, "No, that was impossible." Afterwards, the subject was never revived.

And so these two lovers, both stern in what they thought was right to be done, went on silently together to the last day of parting.

It was almost as quiet a day as that never-to-be-forgotten Sunday at Stowbury. In the forenoon they went a long walk together, during which Mr. Lyon forced Hilary to agree to what she had hitherto steadfastly resisted, that she and Johanna should accept from him enough money, in addition to their own fifty pounds a year, to enable them to live comfortably without her working for her bread.

"Are you ashamed of my working?" she asked, with something between a tear and

a smile. "Sometimes I used to be afraid you would think the less of me because circumstances made me an independent woman, earning my own bread. Do you?"

"My darling! no. I am proud of her. But she must never work any more. Johanna says right; it is a man's place and not a woman's. I will not allow it."

When he spoke in that tone, Hilary always submitted.

He told her another thing, while arranging with her all the business part of their concerns, and to reconcile her to this partial dependence upon him, which, he urged, was only forestalling his rights—told her that before he first quitted England, seven years ago, he had made his will, leaving her, if still unmarried, his sole heir and legatee; indeed, in exactly the position that she would have been had she been his wife.

"This will exists still; so that in any case you are safe. Whether I live or die, no further poverty can ever befall my Hilary."

His — his own — Robert Lyon's own. Her sense of this was so strong that it took

away the sharpness of the parting; made her feel up to the very last minute, when she clung to him — was pressed close to him—heart to heart and lip to lip, for a space that seemed half a lifetime of mixed anguish and joy—as if he were not really going; that, somehow or other, next day or next week he would be back again, as in his frequent reappearances, from Liverpool or elsewhere, exactly as before.

When he was really gone—when, as she sat with her tearless eyes fixed on the closed door—Johanna softly touched her, saying, "My child!" then Hilary learnt it all.

The next twenty-four hours will hardly bear being written about. Most people know what it is—to miss the face out of the house; the life out of the heart. To come and go, to eat and drink, to lie down and rise, and find all things the same, and gradually to recognise that it must be the same indefinitely, perhaps for ever. To be met continually by small trifles—a dropped glove, a book, a scrap of handwriting that

yesterday would have been thrown into the fire, but to-day is picked up, and kept as a relic; and, at times, bursting through the quietness which must be maintained, or, at least assumed, the cruel craving for one word more—one kiss more—for only one five minutes of the eternally ended yesterday!

All this hundreds have gone through; so did Hilary. She said afterwards, it was good for her that she did; it would make her feel for others in a way she had never felt before. Also, because it taught her that such a heart-break can be borne and lived through, when help is sought where only real help can be found; and where, when reason fails, and those who, striving to do right irrespective of the consequences, cry out against their torments, and wonder why they should be made so to suffer—childlike faith comes to their rescue. For, let us have all the philosophy in the world at our fingers' ends, when these terrible crises of affliction come, what are we but children? We know not what a day may bring forth. All our highest wisdom of later years re-

solves itself into the simple hymn which we learned when we were young —

Deep in unfathomable mines,
Of never-failing skill,
He treasures up His vast designs,
And works His sovereign will.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain:
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

The night after Robert Lyon left, Hilary and Johanna were sitting together in their parlour. Hilary had been writing a long letter to Miss Balquidder, explaining that she would now resign in favour of the once named young lady, or any other of the many to whom it would be a blessing, her position in the shop; but that she hoped still to help her—Miss Balquidder—in any way she could point out that would be useful to others. She wished, in her humble way, as a sort of thank-offering from one who had passed through the waters, and been landed safe on shore, to help those who were still struggling, as she herself had struggled once. She desired, as far as in her lay, to

be Miss Balquidder's "right hand" till Mr. Lyon came home.

This letter she read aloud to Johanna, whose failing eyesight refused all candle-light occupation, and then came and sat beside her sister in silence. She felt terribly worn and weary; but she was very quiet now.

"We must go to bed early," was all she said.

"Yes, my child."

And Johanna smoothed her hair, in the old fond way, making no attempt to console her, but only to love her—always the safest consolation. And Hilary was thankful that never, even in her sharpest agonies of grief, had she betrayed that secret which would have made her sister's life miserable, have blotted out the thirty years of motherly love, and caused the other love to rise up like a cloud between her and it, never to be lifted until Johanna sank into the possibly not far-off grave.

"No, no," she thought to herself, as she looked on that frail old face, which even the

secondary grief of watching Hilary all this week seemed to have made frailer and older. "No, it is better as it is; I believe I did right. The end will show."

The end was nearer than she thought. So, sometimes—not often, lest self-sacrifice should become a less holy thing than it is—Providence accepts the will for the act, and makes the latter needless.

There came a sudden knock at the hall-door.

"It is the young people," said Johanna.

"It's not," cried Hilary, starting up, "it 's not their knock. It is—

She never finished the sentence, for she was sobbing in Robert Lyon's arms.

"What does it all mean?" cried the bewildered Johanna, of whom, I must confess, for once nobody took the least notice.

It meant that, by one of these strange accidents, as we call them, which in a moment alter the whole current of things, the senior partner had suddenly died, and his son, not being qualified to take his place in the Liverpool house, had to go out to India

instead of Robert Lyon, who was now indispensably required, as the third senior partner, to remain permanently in England.

This news had met him at Southampton, not many hours before the mail departed. There was not a moment to lose; he had started thence to Liverpool, arranged affairs so far as was possible, and returned to London, travelling day and night, to tell his own tidings, as was best,—or as he thought it was.

Perhaps, at the core of his heart lurked the desire to come suddenly back, as, it is said, if the absent or the dead could come, they would find all things changed: the place filled up in home and hearth—no face of welcome—no heart leaping to heart in the ecstasy of reunion.

Well! if Robert Lyon had any faithless misgivings—and, being a man and in love, perhaps he had—they were ended now.

"Is she glad to see me?" was all he could find to say, when, Johanna having considerately vanished, he might have talked as much as he pleased.

Hilary's only answer was a little, low laugh of inexpressible content.

He lifted up between his hands the sweet face, neither so young nor so pretty as it had been, but, oh! so sweet, with the sweetness that long outlives beauty—a face that a man might look on all his lifetime, and never tire of—so infinitely loving, so infinitely true. And he knew it was his wife's face, to shine upon him day by day, and year by year, till it faded into old age—beautiful and beloved even then. All the strong nature of the man gave way; he wept almost like a child on his "little woman's" shoulder.

Let us leave them there, by that peaceful fireside; these two, who are to sit by one fireside as long as they live. Of their further fortune we know nothing—nor do they themselves—except the one fact, in itself joy enough for any mortal cup to hold, that it will be shared together. Two at the hearth, two abroad; two to labour, two to rejoice; or, if so it must be, two to weep, and two to comfort one another: the man

to be the head of the woman, and the woman the heart of the man. This is the ordination of God; this is the perfect life; none the less perfect that so many fall short of it.

So let us bid them good-bye: Robert Lyon and Hilary Leaf, "Good-bye; God be with ye!" for we shall see them no more.

CHAPTER XII.

ELIZABETH stood at the nursery window, pointing out to little Henry how the lilacs and laburnums were coming into flower in the square below, and speculating with him whether the tribes of sparrows which they had fed all winter from the mignonette boxes on the window-sill, would be building nests in the tall trees of Russell Square; for she wished, with her great aversion to London, to make her nursling as far as possible a "country" child.

Master Henry Leaf Ascott was by no means little now. He could run about on his tottering fat legs, and he could say "Mammy Lizbeth," also "Pa-pa," as had been carefully taught him by his conscientious nurse. At which papa had been at first excessively surprised, then gratified,

and had at last taken kindly to the appellation as a matter of course.

It inaugurated a new era in Peter Ascott's life. At first twice a-week, then every day, he sent up for "Master Ascott," to bear him company at his solitary dessert; he even changed his dinner-hour from half-past six to five, because Elizabeth, with her stern sacrifice of everything to the child's good, had suggested to him, humbly but firmly, that these late hours kept little Henry too long out of his bed. He gave up his bottle of port, and his after-dinner sleep, and took to making water-lilies and caterpillars out of oranges, and boats out of walnut-shells, for his boy's special edification. Sometimes when, at half-past six, Elizabeth, punctual as clockwork, knocked at the dining-room door, she heard father and son laughing together in a most jovial manner, though the decanters were in their places, and the wine-glasses untouched.

And even after the child disappeared, the butler declared that master usually took quietly to his newspaper, or rang for

his tea, or perhaps dozed harmlessly in his chair till bed-time.

I do not allege that Peter Ascott was miraculously changed; people do not so change, especially at his age; externally he was still the same pompous, overbearing, coarse man, with whom, no doubt, his son would have a tolerably sore bargain in years to come. But still the child had touched a soft corner in his heart, the one soft corner which in his youth had yielded to the beauty of Miss Selina Leaf; and the old fellow was a better old fellow than he had once been. Probably, with care, he might be for the rest of his life at least manageable.

Elizabeth hoped so, for his boy's sake, and little as she liked him, she tried to conquer her antipathy as much as she could. She always took care to treat him with extreme respect, and to bring up little Henry to do the same. And, as often happens, Mr. Ascott began gradually to comport himself in a manner deserving of respect. He ceased his oaths and his

coarse language; seldom flew into a passion, and last, not least, the butler avouched that master hardly ever went to bed "muzzy" now. Towards all his domestics, and especially to his son's nurse, he behaved himself more like a master and less like a tyrant; so that the establishment at Russell Square went on in a way more peaceful than had ever been known before.

There was no talk of his giving it a new mistress; he seemed to have had enough of matrimony. Of his late wife he never spoke; whether he loved her or not, whether he had regretted her or not, the love and regret were now alike ended.

Poor Selina! It was Elizabeth only, who, with a sacred sense of duty, occasionally talked to little Henry about "mamma up there" — pointing to the blank bit of blue sky over the trees of Russell Square, and hoped in time to make him understand something about her, and how she had loved him, her "baby." This love—the only beautiful emotion her life had known—was the one fragment that

remained of it after her death; the one remembrance she left to her child.

Little Henry was not in the least like her, nor yet like his father. He took after some forgotten type, some past generation of either family, which reappeared in this as something new. To Elizabeth he was a perfect revelation of beauty and infantile fascination. He filled up every corner of her heart. She grew fat and flourishing, even cheerful; so cheerful that she bore with equanimity the parting with her dear Miss Hilary, who went away in glory and happiness as Mrs. Robert Lyon, to live in Liverpool, and Miss Leaf with her. Thus both Elizabeth's youthful dreams ended in nothing, and it was more than probable that for the future, their lives and hers being so widely apart, she would see very little of her beloved mistresses any more. But they had done their work in her and for her; and it had borne fruit a hundredfold, nay would still bear.

"I know you will take care of this child—he is the hope of the family," said

Miss Leaf when she was giving her last kiss to little Henry. "I could not bear to leave him, if I were not leaving him with you."

And Elizabeth had taken her charge proudly in her arms, knowing she was trusted, and inwardly vowing to be worthy of that trust.

Another dream was likewise ended; so completely that she sometimes wondered if it were ever real, whether she had ever been a happy girl, looking forward as girls do to wifehood and motherhood; or whether she had not been always the staid middle-aged person she was now, whom nobody ever suspected of any such things.

She had been once back to her old home, to settle her mother comfortably upon a weekly allowance, to 'prentice her little brother, to see one sister married, and the other sent off to Liverpool to be servant to Mrs. Lyon. While at Stowbury, she had heard by chance of Tom Cliffe's passing through the town as a Chartist lecturer, or something of the sort, with his pretty,

showy London wife, who, when he brought her there, had looked down rather contemptuously upon the street where Tom was born.

This was all Elizabeth knew about them. They, too, had passed from her life, as phases of keen joy and keener sorrow do pass, like a dream and the shadows of a dream. It may be, life itself will seem at the end to be nothing more.

But Elizabeth Hand's brief love-story was not so to end.

One morning, the same morning when she had been pointing out the lilacs to little Henry, and now came in from the square with a branch of them in her hand, the postman gave her a letter, the handwriting of which made her start as if it had been a visitation from the dead.

"Mammy Lizbeth, Mammy Lizbeth!" cried little Henry, plucking at her gown, but for once his nurse did not notice him. She stood on the door-step, trembling violently; at length she put the letter into her pocket, lifted the child, and got upstairs somehow.

When she had settled her charge to his midday sleep, then, and not till then, did she take out and read the few lines, which, though written on shabby paper, and with more than one blot, were so like—yet so terribly unlike—Tom's caligraphy of old.

"DEAR ELIZABETH,—I have no right to ask any kindness of you; but if you care to see an old friend alive, I wish you would come and see me. I have been long of asking you, lest you might fancy I wanted to get something out of you; for I'm as poor as a rat; and once lately I saw you, looking so well and well-to-do. But it was the same kind old face, and I should like to get one kind look from it before I go where I shan't want any kindness from anybody. However, do just as you choose. —

Yours affectionately,
T. CLIFFE.

"Underneath is my address."

It was in one of those wretched nooks in Westminster, now swept away by Victoria Street and other improvements. Elizabeth

happened to have read about it in one of the many charitable pamphlets, reports, &c., which were forwarded continually to the wealthy Mr. Ascott, and which he sent downstairs to light fires with. What must not poor Tom have sunk to before he had come to live in such a miserable place? His letter was like a cry out of the depths, and the voice was that of her youth, her first love.

Is any woman ever deaf to that? The love may have died a natural death; many first loves do; a riper, completer, happier love may have come in its place: but there must be something unnatural about the woman, and man likewise, who can ever quite forget it—the dew of their youth—the beauty of their dawn.

"Poor Tom, poor Tom!" sighed Elizabeth, "My own poor Tom!"

She forgot Esther; either from Tom's not mentioning her, or in the strong return to old times which his letter produced; forgot her for the time being, as completely as if she had never existed. Even when the recollection came, it made little difference.

Her sharp jealousy, her dislike and contempt, had all calmed down; she thought she could now see Tom's wife as any other woman. Especially if, as the letter indicated, they were both so very poor and miserable.

Possibly, Esther had suggested writing it? Perhaps, though Tom did not, Esther did "want to get something out of her"—Elizabeth Hand, who was known to have large wages, and be altogether a thriving person? Well, it mattered little. The one all-important fact remained: Tom was in distress; Tom needed her; she must go.

Her only leisure time was of an evening, after Henry was in bed. The intervening hours, especially the last one, when the child was downstairs with his father, calmed her: subdued the tumult of old remembrances that came surging up and beating at the long-shut door of her heart. When her boy returned, leaping and laughing, and playing all sorts of tricks as she put him to bed, she could smile too. And when kneeling beside her in his pretty

white night-gown, he stammered through the prayer which she had thought it right to begin to teach him, though of course he was too young to understand it—the words "Thy will be done;" "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us;" and lastly, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," struck home to his nurse's inmost soul.

"Mammy, Mammy Lizbeth's tying!"

Yes, she was crying, but it did her good. She was able to kiss her little boy, who slept like a top in five minutes: then she took off her good silk gown, and dressed herself in a cotton one; soberly and decently, but so that people should not suspect, in that low and dangerous neighbourhood, the sovereigns she carried in an under-pocket, ready to use as occasion required. Thus equipped, she started without a moment's delay for Tom's lodging.

It was poorer than even she expected. One attic room, bare almost as when it was built. No chimney or grate, no furniture except a box which served as both table

and chair, and a heap of straw, with a blanket thrown over it. The only comfort about it was that it was clean: Tom's innate sense of refinement had abided with him to the last.

Elizabeth had time to make all these observations, for Tom was out; gone, the landlady said, to the druggist's shop round the corner.

"He's very bad, ma'am," added the woman civilly, probably led thereto by Elizabeth's respectable appearance, and the cab in which she had come—lest she should lose a minute's time. "Can't last long, and Lord knows who's to bury him."

With that sentence knelling in her ears, Elizabeth waited till she heard the short cough and the hard breathing of some one toiling heavily up the stair.

Tom, Tom himself. But oh, so altered! with every bit of youth gone out of him; with death written on every line of his haggard face, the death he had once prognosticated with a sentimental pleasure, but which now had come upon him in all its ghastly reality.

He was in the last stage of consumption. The disease was latent in his family, Elizabeth knew: she had known it when she had belonged to him, and fondly thought that, as his wife, her incessant care might save him from his fate; but nothing could save him now.

"Who 's that?" said he, in his own sharp, fretful voice.

"Me, Tom. But don't speak. Sit down till your cough's over."

Tom grasped her hand as she stood by him, but he made no further demonstration, nor used any expression of gratitude. He seemed far too ill. Sick people are always absorbed in the sad present; they seldom trouble themselves much about the past. Only there was something in the way Tom clung to her hand, helplessly, imploringly, that moved the inmost heart of Elizabeth.

"I'm very bad, you see. This cough; oh, it shakes me dreadfully, especially of nights."

"Have you any doctor?"

"The druggist close by, or rather the

druggist's shopman. He's a very kind young fellow, from our county I fancy, for he asked me once if I wasn't a Stowbury man, and ever since he has doctored me for nothing, and given me a shilling too now and then, when I've been a'most clemmed to death in the winter."

"Oh, Tom, why didn't you write to me before? Have you actually wanted food?"

"Yes, many a time. I've been out of work this twelvemonth."

"But Esther?"

"Who!" screamed Tom.

"Your wife."

"My wife? I've got none! She spent everything, till I fell ill, and then she met a fellow with lots o' money. Curse her!"

The fury with which he spoke shook him all over and sent him into another violent fit of coughing, out of which he revived by degrees, but in a state of such complete exhaustion that Elizabeth hazarded no more questions. He must evidently be dealt with exactly like a child.

She made up her mind in her own silent

way; as indeed she had done ever since she came into the room.

"Lie down, Tom, and keep yourself quiet for a little. I'll be back as soon as I can, back with something to do you good. You won't object?"

"No, no; you can do anything you like with me. You always could."

Elizabeth groped her way downstairs, strangely calm and self-possessed. There was need. Tom, dying, had come to her as his sole support and consolation; thrown himself helplessly upon her, never doubting either her will or her power to help him. Neither must fail. The inexplicable strength, sometimes found in the very gentlest, quietest, and apparently weakest of women, nerved her now.

She went up and down street after street, looking for lodgings, till the evening darkened, and the Abbey towers rose grimly against the summer sky. Then she crossed over Westminster Bridge, and in a little street on the Surrey side she found what she wanted—a decent room, half sitting,

half bedroom, with what looked like a decent landlady. There was no time to make many inquiries; anything was better than to leave Tom another night where he was.

She paid a week's rent in advance; bought firing and provisions; everything she could think of to make him comfortable; and then she went to fetch him in a cab.

The sick man offered no resistance; indeed, he hardly seemed to know what she was doing with him. She discovered the cause of this half insensibility when, in making a bundle of his few clothes, she found a packet labelled "opium."

"Don't take it from me," he said, pitifully. "It's the only comfort I have."

But when he found himself in the cheerful room, with the fire blazing and the tea laid out, he woke up like a person out of a bad dream.

"Oh, Elizabeth, I'm so comfortable?"

Elizabeth could have wept.

Whether the wholesome food and drink revived him, or whether it was one of the

sudden flashes of life that often occur in consumptive patients, but he seemed really better, and began to talk, telling Elizabeth about his long illness, and saying over again how very kind the druggist's young man had been to him.

"I'm sure he's a gentleman, though he has come down in the world; for, as he says, 'misery makes a man acquainted with strange bedfellows, and takes the nonsense out of him.' I think so too, and if ever I get better, I don't mean to go about the country speaking against born gentlefolks any more. They're much of a muchness as ourselves—bad and good; a little of all sorts; the same flesh and blood as we are. Aren't they, Elizabeth?"

"I suppose so."

"And there's another thing I mean to do. I mean to try and be good like you. Many a night, when I've lain on that straw, and thought I was dying, I've remembered you, and all the things you used to say to me. You are a good woman; there never was a better."

Elizabeth smiled, a faint, rather sad smile. For, as she was washing up the tea things, she had noticed Tom's voice grow feebler, and his features sharper and more wan.

"I'm very tired," he said. "I'm afraid to go to bed, I get such wretched nights; but I think, if I lay down in my clothes, I could go to sleep."

Elizabeth helped him to the small pallet, shook his pillow, and covered him up, as if he had been a child.

"You're very good to me," he said, and looked up at her—Tom's bright, fond look of years ago. But it passed away in a moment, and he closed his eyes, saying he was so terribly tired.

"Then I'll bid you good-bye, for I ought to have been at home by now. You'll take care of yourself, Tom, and I'll come and see you again the very first hour I can be spared. And if you want me, you'll send to me at once? You know where?"

"I will," said Tom. "It's the same house, isn't it, in Russell Square?"

"Yes." And they were both silent.

After a minute, Tom asked, in a troubled voice,

"Have you forgiven me?"

"Yes, Tom, quite."

"Won't you give me one kiss, Elizabeth?"

She turned away. She did not mean to be hard, but somehow she could not kiss Esther's husband.

"Ah, well; it's all the same! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, Tom."

But as she stood at the door, and looked back at him, lying with his eyes shut, and as white as if he were dead, Elizabeth's heart melted. He was her Tom, her own Tom, of whom she had been so fond, so proud; whose future she had joyfully anticipated, long before she thought of herself as mixed up with it; and he was dying, dying at four-and-twenty; passing away to the other world; where, perhaps, she might meet him yet, with no cruel Esther between.

"Tom," she said, and knelt beside him, "Tom, I didn't mean to vex you. I'll try

to be as good as a sister to you. I 'll never forsake you as long as you live."

"I know you never will."

"Good-bye, then, for to-night."

And she did kiss him, mouth to mouth, quietly and tenderly. She was so glad of it afterwards.

It was late enough when she reached Russell Square; but nobody ever questioned the proceedings of Mrs. Hand, who was a privileged person. She crept in beside her little Henry, and as the child turned in his sleep, and put his arms about her neck, she clasped him tight, and thought there was still something to live for in this weary world.

All night she thought over what best could be done for Tom. Though she never deceived herself for a moment as to his state, still she thought, with care and proper nursing, he might live a few months. Especially, if she could get him into the Consumption Hospital, newly started in Chelsea, of which, she was aware, Mr. Ascott, who dearly liked to see his name in a charity list, was one of the governors.

There was no time to be lost; she determined to speak to her master at once.

The time she chose was when she brought down little Henry, who was now always expected to appear, and say, "Dood morning, papa," before Mr. Ascott went into the city.

As they stood, the boy laughing in his father's face, and the father beaming all over with delight, the bitter, almost fierce thought smote Elizabeth, Why should Peter Ascott be standing there, fat and flourishing—and poor Tom dying? It made her bold to ask the only favour she ever had asked of the master whom she did not care for, and to whom she had done her duty simply as duty, without, until lately, one fragment of respect.

"Sir, if you please, might I speak with you a minute, before you go out?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Hand. Anything about Master Henry? Or perhaps yourself? You want more wages? Very well, I shall be glad, in any reasonable way, to show my satisfaction at the manner in which you bring up my son."

"Thank you, sir," said Elizabeth, courtesying. "But it is not that."

And in the briefest language she could find, she explained what it was.

Mr. Ascott knitted his brows, and looked important. He never scattered his benefits with a silent hand, and he dearly liked to create difficulties, if only to show how he could smooth them down.

"To get a patient admitted at the Consumption Hospital is, you should be aware, no easy matter, until the building at Queen's Elm is complete. But I flatter myself I have influence. I have subscribed a deal of money. Possibly the person may be got in in time. Who did you say he was?"

"Thomas Cliffe. He married one of the servants here, Esther"—

"Oh, don't trouble yourself about the name; I shouldn't recollect it. The housekeeper might. Why didn't his wife apply to the housekeeper?"

The careless question seemed hardly to expect an answer, and Elizabeth gave none. She could not bear to make public Tom's misery and Esther's shame.

"And you say he is a Stowbury man? That is certainly a claim. I always feel bound, somewhat as a member of Parliament might be, to do my best for anyone belonging to my native town. So be satisfied, Mrs. Hand; consider the thing settled."

And he was going away, but time being of such great moment, Elizabeth ventured to detain him till he had written the letter of recommendation, and found out what days the application for admission could be received. He did it very patiently, and even took out his purse, and laid a sovereign on the top of the letter.

"I suppose the man is poor; you can use this for his benefit."

"There is no need, thank you, sir," said Elizabeth, putting it gently aside. She could not bear that Tom should accept anybody's money but her own.

At her first spare moment she wrote him a long letter, explaining what she had done, and appointing the next day but one, the earliest possible, for taking him out to Chelsea herself. If he objected to the plan,

he was to write and say so; but she urged him as strongly as she could, not to let slip this opportunity of obtaining good nursing and first-rate medical care.

Many times during the day the thought of Tom, alone in his one room—comfortable though it was, and though she had begged the landlady to see that he wanted nothing—came across her with a sudden pang. His face, feebly lifted up from the pillow, with its last affectionate smile—the sound of his cough, as she stood listening outside on the stair-head—haunted her all through that sunshiny June day; and, mingled with it, came ghostly visions of that other day in June—her happy Whitsun holiday—her first and her last.

No letter coming from Tom on the appointed morning, she left Master Henry in the charge of the housemaid, who was very fond of him, as indeed he bade fair to be spoiled by the whole establishment at Russell Square, and went down to Westminster.

There was a long day before her, so she took a minute's breathing space on West-

minster Bridge, and watched the great current of London life ebbing and flowing —life on the river and life on the shore; everybody so busy and active and bright.

"Poor Tom, poor Tom!" she sighed, and wondered whether his ruined life would ever come to any happy ending, except death.

She hurried on, and soon found the street where she had taken his lodging. At the corner of it was, as is too usual in London streets, a public-house, about which more than the usual number of disreputable idlers were hanging. There were also one or two policemen, who were ordering the little crowd to give way to a group of twelve men coming out.

"What is that?" asked Elizabeth.

"Coroner's inquest; jury proceeding to view the body."

Elizabeth, who had never come into contact with anything of the sort, stood aside with a sense of awe, to let the little procession pass, and then followed it up the street.

It stopped; oh no! not at that door! But it was; there was no mistaking the number, nor the drawn-down blind in the upper room—Tom's room.

"Who is dead?" she asked, in a hoarse whisper that made the policeman stare.

"Oh! nobody particular; a young man, found dead in his bed; supposed to be a case of consumption; verdict will probably be 'Died by the visitation of God.'"

Ay, that familiar phrase, our English law's solemn recognition of our national religious feeling—was true here. God had "visited" poor Tom; he suffered no more.

Elizabeth leaned against the doorway, and saw the twelve jurymen go upstairs with a clatter of feet, and come down again, one after the other, less noisily, and some of them looking grave. Nobody took any notice of her, until the lodging-house mistress appeared.

"Oh, here she is, gentlemen. This is the young woman as saw him last alive. She'll give her evidence. She'll tell you I'm not a bit to blame."

And pulling Elizabeth after her, the landlady burst into a torrent of explanation; how she had done her very best for the poor fellow, how she had listened at his door several times during the first day, and heard him cough, that is, she thought she had, but towards night all was so very quiet; and there having come a letter by post, she thought she would take it up to him—

"And I went in, gentlemen, and I declare, upon my oath, I found him lying just as he is now, and as cold as a stone."

"Let me pass; I'm a doctor," said somebody behind; a young man, very shabbily dressed, with a large beard. He pushed aside the landlady, and Elizabeth, till he saw the latter's face.

"Give that young woman a chair and a glass of water, will you?" he called out; and his authoritative manner impressed the jurymen, who gathered round him, ready and eager to hear anything he could say.

He gave his name as John Smith, druggist's assistant; said that the young man

who lodged upstairs, whose death he had only just heard of, had been his patient for some months, and was in the last stage of consumption. He had no doubt the death had ensued from perfectly natural causes, as he explained in such technical language as completely to overpower the jury, and satisfy them accordingly. They quitted the parlour, and proceeded to the public-house, where, after a brief consultation, they delivered their verdict, as the astute policeman had foretold, "Died by the visitation of God:" took pipes and brandy all round at the bar, and then adjourned to their several homes, gratified at having done their duty to their country.

Meantime, Elizabeth crept upstairs. Nobody hindered or followed her; nobody cared anything for the solitary dead.

There he lay—poor Tom!—almost as she had left him; the counterpane was hardly disturbed, the candle she had placed on the chair had burnt down to a bit of wick, which still remained in the socket. Nobody had touched him, or anything

about him, as, in all cases of "Found dead," English law exacts.

Whether he had died soon after she quitted him that night, or whether he had lingered through the long hours of darkness, or of daylight following, alive and conscious perhaps, yet too weak to call anyone, even had there been anyone he cared to call—when, or how, the spirit had passed away unto Him who gave it, were mysteries that could never be known.

But it was all over now; he lay at rest; with the death smile on his face. Elizabeth, as she stood and looked at him, could not, dared not weep.

"My poor Tom, my own dear Tom," was all she thought, and knew that he was all her own now; that she had loved him through everything, and loved him to the end.

CHAPTER XIII.

ELIZABETH spent the greatest part of her holiday in that house, in that room. Nobody interfered with her; nobody asked in what relation she stood to the deceased, or what right she had to take upon herself the arrangements for his funeral. Everybody was only too glad to let her assume a responsibility, which would otherwise have fallen on the parish.

The only person who appeared to remember either her or the dead man, was the druggist's assistant, who sent in, without being applied to, the necessary medical certificate as to the cause of death. Elizabeth took it to the Registrar, and thence proceeded to an undertaker hard by, with whom she arranged all about the funeral, which she wished to take place in the new

cemetery at Kensal Green. She thought she should like that better than a close, noisy London churchyard.

Before she left the house, she saw poor Tom laid in his coffin, and covered up for ever from mortal eyes. Then, and not till then, she sat down beside him and wept.

Nobody contested with her the possession of the few things that had belonged to him, which were scarcely more than the clothes he had on when he died; so she made them up into a parcel and took them away with her. In his waistcoat-pocket she found one book, a little Testament which she had herself given him. It looked as if it had been a good deal read. If all his studies, all his worship of "pure intellect," as the one supreme good, had ended in that, it was a blessed ending.

When she reached home, Elizabeth went at once to her master, returned him his letter of recommendation, and explained to him that his kindness was not needed now.

Mr. Ascott seemed a good deal shocked,

inquired from her a few particulars, and again took out his purse, his one panacea for all mortal woes. But Elizabeth declined; she said she would only ask him for an advance of her next half-year's wages. She preferred burying her old friend herself.

She buried him, herself the only mourner, on a bright summer's day, with the sun shining dazzlingly on the white gravestones in Kensal Green. The clergyman appeared, read the service, and went away again. A few minutes ended it all. When the undertaker and his men had also departed, she sat down on a bench near, to watch the sexton filling up the grave—Tom's grave. She was very quiet, and none but a closely-observant person watching her face could have penetrated into the truth of what your impulsive characters, always in the extremes of mirth or misery, never understand about quiet people—that "still waters run deep."

While she sat there, some one came past her, and turned round. It was the shabby-looking chemist's assistant, who had ap-

peared at the inquest, and given the satisfactory evidence which had prevented the necessity of her giving hers.

Elizabeth rose, and acknowledged him with a respectful courtesy; for under his threadbare clothes was the bearing of a gentleman, and he had been so kind to Tom.

"I am too late," he said; "the funeral is over. I meant to have attended it, and seen the last of the poor fellow."

"Thank you, sir," replied Elizabeth, gratefully.

The young man stood before her, looking at her earnestly for a minute or two, and then exclaimed, with a complete change of voice and manner—

"Elizabeth! don't you know me? What has become of my aunt Johanna?"

It was Ascott Leaf.

But no wonder Elizabeth had not recognised him. His close-cropped hair, his large beard hiding half his face, and a pair of spectacles which he had assumed, were a sufficient disguise. Besides, the great change from his former "dandy" appear-

ance to the extreme of shabbiness; his clothes being evidently worn as long as they could possibly hold together, and his generally depressed air giving the effect of one who had gone down in the world, made him, even without the misleading "John Smith," most unlikely to be identified with the Ascott Leaf of old.

"I never should have known you, sir," said Elizabeth, truthfully, when her astonishment had a little subsided, "but I am very glad to see you. Oh, how thankful your aunts will be!"

"Do you think so? I thought it was quite the contrary. But it does not matter; they will never hear of me, unless you tell them—and I believe I may trust you. You would not betray me, if only for the sake of that poor fellow yonder?"

"No, sir."

"Now, tell me something about my aunts, especially my aunt Johanna."

And sitting down in the sunshine, with his arm upon the back of the bench, and his hand hiding his eyes, the poor prodigal

listened in silence to everything Elizabeth told him; of his aunt Selina's marriage and death, of Mr. Lyon's return, and of the happy home at Liverpool.

"They are all quite happy, then?" said he at length; "they seem to have begun to prosper ever since they got rid of me. Well, I'm glad of it. I only wanted to hear of them from you. I shall never trouble them any more. You 'll keep my secret, I know. And now I must go, for I have not a minute more to spare. Good-bye, Elizabeth."

With a humility and friendliness, strange enough in Ascott Leaf, he held out his hand —empty, for he had nothing to give now— to his aunt's old servant. But Elizabeth detained him.

"Don't go, sir; please, don't; not just yet." And then she added, with an earnest respectfulness that touched the heart of the poor shabby man, "I hope you 'll pardon the liberty I take. I'm only a servant, but I knew you when you were a boy, Mr. Leaf; and if you would trust me, if you would

let me be of use to you in any way, I should be so glad—were it only because you were so good to *him* there."

"Poor Tom Cliffe; he was not a bad fellow; he liked me rather, I think; and I was able to doctor him, and help him a little. Heigh-ho! it's a comfort to think I ever did any good to anybody."

Ascott sighed, drew his rusty coat-sleeve across his eyes, and sat contemplating his boots, which were anything but dandy boots now.

"Elizabeth, what relation was Tom to you? If I had known you were acquainted with him I should have been afraid to go near him; but I felt sure, though he came from Stowbury, he did not guess who I was; he only knew me as Mr. Smith; and he never once mentioned you. Was he your cousin; or what?"

Elizabeth considered a moment, and then told the simple fact; it could not matter now.

"I was once going to be married to him, but he saw somebody he liked better, and married her."

"Poor girl; poor Elizabeth!"

Perhaps nothing could have shown the great change in Ascott more than the tone in which he uttered these words; a tone of deep respect and kindly pity, from which he never once departed during that conversation, and many, many others, so long as their confidential relations lasted.

"Now, sir, would you be so kind as to tell me something about yourself? I'll not repeat anything to your aunts, if you don't wish it."

Ascott yielded. He had been so long, so utterly forlorn. He sat down beside Elizabeth, and then, with eyes often averted, and with many breaks between, which she had to fill up as best she could, he told her all his story, even to the sad secret which had caused him to run away from home, and hide himself in the last place where they would have thought he was lurking, the safe wilderness of London. There, carefully disguised, he had lived decently while his money lasted, and then, driven step by step to the brink of destitution, he

had offered himself for employment in the lowest grade of his own profession, and been taken as assistant by the not over-scrupulous chemist and druggist in that not too respectable neighbourhood of Westminster, with a salary of twenty pounds a year.

"And I actually live upon it," added he, with a bitter smile. I can't run into debt; for who would trust me? And I dress in rags almost, as you see. And I get my meals how and where I can; and I sleep under the shop-counter. A pretty life for Mr. Ascott Leaf, isn't it now? What would my aunts say if they knew it?"

"They would say it was an honest life, and that they were not a bit ashamed of you."

Ascot drew himself up a little, and his chest heaved visibly under the close-buttoned, thread-bare coat.

"Well, at least it is a life that makes no body else miserable."

Ay, that wonderful teacher, Adversity,

> Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
> Wears yet a precious jewel in its head,

had left behind this jewel in the young man's heart. A disguised, beggared outcast, he had found out the value of an honest name; forsaken, unfriended, he had learnt the preciousness of home and love; made a servant of, tyrannised over, and held in low esteem, he had been taught by hard experience the secret of true humility and charity—the esteeming of others better than himself.

Not with all natures does misfortune so work; but it did with his. He had sinned; he had paid the cost of his sin in bitter suffering; but the result was cheaply bought, and he already began to feel that it was so.

"Yes," said he, in answer to a question of Elizabeth's, "I really am, for some things, happier than I used to be. I feel more like what I was in the old days, when I was a little chap at Stowbury! Poor old Stowbury! I often think of the place in a way that 's perfectly ridiculous. Still, if anything happens to me, I should like my aunts to know it, and that I didn't forget them."

"But, sir," asked Elizabeth, earnestly,

"do you never mean to go near your aunts again?'"

"I can't say; it all depends upon circumstances. I suppose," he added, "if, as is said, one's sin is sure to find one out, the same rule goes by contraries. It seems poor Cliffe once spoke of me to a district visitor, the only visitor he ever had; and this gentleman, hearing of the inquest, came yesterday to inquire about him of me; and the end was that he offered me a situation with a person he knew, a very respectable chemist in Tottenham Court Road."

"And shall you go?"

"To be sure. I 've learned to be thankful for small mercies. Nobody will find me out, or recognise me; you didn't. Who knows? I may even have the honour of dispensing drugs to Uncle Ascott, of Russell Square."

"But," said Elizabeth, after a pause, "you will not always remain as John Smith, druggist's shopman, throwing away all your good education, and position, and name?"

"Elizabeth," said he, in a humbled tone, "how dare I ever resume my own name, and get back my rightful position, while Peter Ascott lives? Can you or anybody point out a way?"

She thought the question over in her clear head; clear still, even at this hour, when she had to think for others, though all personal feeling and interest were buried in the grave over which the sexton was now laying the turf that would soon grow smoothly green.

"If I might advise, Mr. Leaf, I should say, save up all your money, and then go, just as you are, with an honest, bold front, right into my master's house, with the fifty pounds in your hand—"

"By Jove, you've hit it!" cried Ascott, starting up. "What a thing a woman's head is! I've turned over scheme after scheme, but I never once thought of any so simple as that. Bravo, Elizabeth! You're a remarkable woman."

She smiled, a very sad smile; but still she felt glad. Anything that she could possibly

do for any creature belonging to her dear mistresses seemed to this faithful servant the natural and bounden duty of her life.

Long after the young man, whose mercurial temperament no trouble could repress, had gone away in excellent spirits, leaving her an address where she could always find him, and give him regular news of his aunts, though he made her promise to give them, as yet, no tidings in return, Elizabeth sat still, watching the sun decline and the shadows lengthen over the field of graves. In the calmness and beauty of this solitary place, an equal calm seemed to come over her; a sense of how wonderfully events had linked themselves together and worked themselves out; how even poor Tom's mournful death had brought about this meeting, which might end in restoring to her beloved mistresses their lost sheep, their outcast, miserable boy. She did not reason the matter out, but she felt it, and felt that, in making her, in some degree, His instrument, God had been very good to her in the midst of her desolation.

It seemed Elizabeth's lot always to have to put aside her own troubles for the trouble of somebody else. Almost immediately after Tom Cliffe's death, her little Henry fell ill with scarlatina, and remained for many months in a state of health so fragile as to engross all her thought and care. It was with difficulty that she contrived a few times to go for Henry's medicines to the shop where "John Smith" served.

She noticed that every time he looked healthier, brighter, freer from that aspect of broken-down respectability which had touched her so much. He did not dress any better, but still "the gentleman" in him could never be hidden or lost, and he said his master treated him "like a gentleman," which was apparently a pleasant novelty.

"I have some time to myself also. Shop shuts at 9, and I get up at 5 A.M.; bless us! what would my aunt Hilary say to that! And it's not for nothing I do it, either. There are more ways than one of turning

an honest penny, when a young fellow really sets about it. Elizabeth, you used to be a literary character yourself; look into the ——, and the ——" (naming two popular magazines), "and if you find a series of especially clever papers on sanitary reform, and so on, I did 'em!"

He slapped his chest with Ascott's merry laugh of old. It cheered Elizabeth for a long while afterwards.

Soon she had to take little Henry to Brighton, and lost sight of "John Smith" for some time longer.

It was on a snowy February day, when, having brought the child home quite strong, and received unlimited gratitude and guineas from the delighted father, Master Henry's faithful nurse stood in her usual place at the dining-room door, waiting for the interminable grace of "only five minutes more" to be over, and her boy carried ignominiously but contentedly to bed.

The footman knocked at the door. "A young man wanting to speak to master on particular business."

"Let him send in his name."

"He says you wouldn't know it, sir."

"Show him in, then. Probably a case of charity, as usual. Oh!"

And Mr. Ascott's opinion was confirmed by the appearance of the shabby young man, with the long beard, whom Elizabeth did not wonder he never recognised in the least.

She ought to have retired, and yet she could not. She hid herself partly behind the door, afraid of passing Ascott; dreading alike to wound him by recognition or non-recognition. But he took no notice. He seemed excessively agitated.

"Come a-begging, young man, I suppose? Wants a situation, as hundreds do, who think that I have half the clerkships in the city at my disposal, and that I am made of money besides. But it's no good, I tell you, sir; I never give nothing to strangers, except—Here, Henry, my son, take that person there this half-crown."

And the little boy, in his pretty purple velvet frock, and his prettier face, trotted

across the room, and put the money into poor Ascott's hand. He took it; and then, to the astonishment of Master Henry, and the still greater astonishment of his father, lifted up the child and kissed him.

"Young man, young fellow—"

"I see you don't know me, Mr. Ascott, and it's not surprising. But I have come to repay you this"—he laid a fifty-pound note down on the table. "Also, to thank you earnestly for not prosecuting me, and to say"—

"Good God!"—the sole expletive Peter Ascott had been heard to use for long. "Ascott Leaf, is that you? I thought you were in Australia, or dead, or something."

"No, I'm alive and here, more's the pity, perhaps. Except that I have lived to pay you back what I cheated you out of. What you generously gave me I can't pay, though I may some time. Meantime, I have brought you this. It's honestly earned. Yes," observing the keen, doubtful look, "though I have hardly a coat to my back, I assure you, it's honestly earned."

Mr. Ascott made no reply. He stooped over the bank-note, examined it, folded it, and put it into his pocket-book; then, after another puzzled investigation of Ascott, cleared his throat.

"Mrs. Hand, you had better take Master Henry upstairs."

An hour after, when little Henry had long been sound asleep, and she was sitting at her usual evening sewing in her solitary nursery, Elizabeth learnt that the "shabby young man" was still in the dining-room with Mr. Ascott, who had rung for tea and some cold meat with it. And the footman stated, with undisguised amazement, that the shabby young man was actually sitting at the same table with master!

Elizabeth smiled to herself, and held her tongue. Now, as ever, she always kept the secrets of the family.

About ten o'clock she was summoned to the dining-room.

There stood Peter Ascott, pompous as ever, but with a certain kindly good-humour lightening his heavy face, looking

condescendingly around him, and occasionally rubbing his hands slowly together, as if he were exceedingly well pleased with himself. There stood Ascott Leaf, looking bright and handsome in spite of his shabbiness, and quite at his ease—which small peculiarity was never likely to be knocked out of him under the most depressing circumstances.

He shook hands with Elizabeth warmly.

"I wanted to ask you if you have any message for Liverpool. I go there to-morrow on business for Mr. Ascott, and afterwards I shall probably go and see my aunts." He faltered a moment, but quickly shook the emotion off. "Of course I shall tell them all about you, Elizabeth. Any special message, eh?"

"Only my duty, sir, and Master Henry is quite well again," said Elizabeth, formally, and dropping her old-fashioned courtesy; after which, as quickly as she could, she slipped out of the dining-room.

But long, long after, when all the house was gone to bed, she stood at the nursery-

window, looking down upon the trees of the square, that stretched their motionless arms up into the moonlight sky—just such a moonlight as it was once, more than three years ago, the night little Henry was born. And she recalled all the past, from the day when Miss Hilary hung up her bonnet for her in the house-place at Stowbury; the dreary life at No. 15; the Sunday nights when she and Tom Cliffe used to go wandering round and round the square.

"Poor Tom!" sighed she to herself, thinking of Ascott Leaf, and how happy he had looked, and how happy his aunts would be to-morrow. "Well, Tom would be glad too if he knew all."

But, happy as everybody was, there was nothing so close to Elizabeth's heart as the one grave over which the snow was now lying, white and peaceful, out at Kensal Green.

Elizabeth is still living;—which is a great blessing, for nobody could well do without her. She will probably attain a

good old age; being healthy and strong, very equable in temper now, and very cheerful too, in her quiet way. Doubtless, she will yet have Master Henry's children climbing her knees, and calling her "Mammy Lizbeth."

But she will never marry. She never loved anybody but Tom.

THE END.

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